

WORLD CUP

20
22

Sports Illustrated

DECEMBER 2022

VOLUME 133 | NO. 11
SI.COM | @SINOW

Photograph by
THOMAS LOVELOCK



Weston
McKennie

Tyler
Adams

USMNT

THE WORLD'S YOUNGEST SQUAD

Is Ready for the World's Biggest Stage

BY BRIAN STRAUS

Christian
Pulisic

A split second can
change everything.

Keep Going Forward

 **PROSPEX**



SPEEDTIMER

SEIKO

SINCE 1881

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT
SEIKOLUXE.COM



LINEUP

DECEMBER 2022
VOLUME 133 | NO. 11



FEATURES

78

LONG SNAPPERS

They're as overlooked as they are essential. Inside their upside-down world

BY ALEX PREWITT

88

GRIZZLIES

Now they're the darlings of the NBA, but their forgotten Vancouver chapter is just as intriguing

BY L. JON WERTHEIM

96

BRANDON THOMAS

Cancer took part of his body, but it could not keep him off of his high school football field

BY GREG BISHOP

104

BO JACKSON

One of the greatest backs of all time was destined for Tampa, until the Buccaneers mucked it all up

BY JEFF PEARLMAN

FULL HEART

With the help of a prosthetic, Thomas has excelled on the field for his high school in eastern Washington.

DEPARTMENTS

LEADING OFF [P. 4](#)

SCORECARD [P. 10](#)

FACES IN THE CROWD [P. 26](#)

POINT AFTER [P. 112](#)



POWERFUL MAX STRENGTH

9

COUGHING
STUFFY NOSE
MINOR BODY PAIN
CHEST CONGESTION
SINUS CONGESTION
SINUS PRESSURE
SORE THROAT
HEADACHE
FEVER

SYMPTOM RELIEF

DayQuil SEVERE helps you knock out 9 of your worst cold & flu symptoms. Just one dose starts working fast for powerful daytime relief.

USE AS DIRECTED. KEEP OUT OF REACH OF CHILDREN.

LINEUP

EYE ON THE BALL

Yunus Musah [6], a 19-year-old midfielder who could have played for England, Italy or Ghana, is at the forefront of the U.S. youth movement.



SI has two covers this month, featuring the U.S. men's national team and France star Kylian Mbappé.

To purchase reprints of these covers, go to sicovers.com



QATAR 2022 | PREVIEW

30	40	52	55	66	70
USMNT	KYLIAN MBAPPÉ	QATAR TIMELINE	GROUP PREVIEW	FAREWELL FORMAT	PENALTY KICKS
National team manager Gregg Berhalter's historically youthful squad is out to make a statement	The world's most expensive player hopes to make France the first repeat men's champ in 60 years	It's been 12 long and controversial years since FIFA awarded the tiny desert nation the World Cup	We've got what you need to know about every squad before the games kick off	With the field set to expand in 2026, enjoy one last tournament of structural perfection	So you think match-deciding shootouts come down to dumb luck? Think again
BY BRIAN STRAUS	BY BRIAN STRAUS		plus: KNOCKOUT BRACKET	BY BRIAN STRAUS	BY BEN LYTLETON



SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (ISSN 0038-822X) IS PUBLISHED MONTHLY BY THE ARENA MEDIA BRANDS, LLC. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: 200 VESEY STREET, 24TH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10281-1008. OWNED BY ABG-SI LLC. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: 1411 BROADWAY, 21ST FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10018. PERIODICALS POSTAGE PAID AT NEW YORK, NY AND ADDITIONAL MAILING OFFICES. POSTMASTER: SEND ALL UAA TO CFS. (SEE DMM 707.4.12.5); NON-POSTAL AND MILITARY FACILITIES: SEND ADDRESS CORRECTIONS TO SPORTS ILLUSTRATED MAGAZINE, P.O. BOX 37576, BOONE, IA 50037-0508. U.S. SUBSCRIBERS: IF THE POSTAL SERVICE ALERTS US THAT YOUR MAGAZINE IS UNDELIVERABLE, WE HAVE NO FURTHER OBLIGATION UNLESS WE RECEIVE A CORRECTED ADDRESS WITHIN TWO YEARS. CANADA POST PUBLICATION MAIL AGREEMENT NO. 40624074. YOUR BANK MAY PROVIDE UPDATES TO THE CARD INFORMATION WE HAVE ON FILE. YOU MAY OPT OUT OF THIS SERVICE AT ANY TIME. MAILING LIST: WE MAKE A PORTION OF OUR MAILING LIST AVAILABLE TO REPUTABLE FIRMS. IF YOU WOULD PREFER THAT WE NOT INCLUDE YOUR NAME, PLEASE CALL OR WRITE US. © 2022 ABG-SI LLC, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. REPRODUCTION IN WHOLE OR IN PART WITHOUT PERMISSION IS PROHIBITED. SPORTS ILLUSTRATED IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK OF ABG-SI LLC. CUSTOMER SERVICE AND SUBSCRIPTIONS: FOR 24/7 SERVICE, PLEASE VISIT [SI.COM/MY ACCOUNT](https://si.com/myaccount). YOU CAN ALSO CALL 877-747-1045 OR WRITE SI AT P.O. BOX 37576, BOONE, IA 50037-0508.



LEADING OFF

HEISMAN

HALFWAY THROUGH COLLEGE FOOTBALL'S REGULAR
AMONG THE CONTENDERS: THE REIGNING HEISMAN WINNER (BRYCE YOUNG),
BLAKE CORUM), A LATE-BLOOMING PASSING STAR (HENDON HOOKER)

BLAKE CORUM

MICHIGAN RB, JUNIOR

Through Week 7

- 901 rushing yards (2nd in FBS)
- 13 rushing TDs (1st in FBS)
- Team record/AP rank: 7-0/No. 4

Photograph by
DAVID E. KLUTHO

HUNTERS



SEASON, THE HEISMAN TROPHY RACE WAS A LOT LIKE THE PLAYOFF RACE—WIDE OPEN. A REIGNING NATIONAL CHAMP (STETSON BENNETT), A POSITIONAL OUTLIER (RUNNING BACK AND TWO SOPHOMORES LIKELY TO DOMINATE NEXT YEAR'S HEISMAN CHATTER, TOO



C.J. STROUD

OHIO STATE QB, SOPHOMORE

Through Week 7

- 24 passing TDs (T-1st in FBS), 3 INT
- 207.6 QB rating (1st in FBS)
- Team record/AP rank: 6-0/No. 2

Photograph by
ERICK W. RASCO



STETSON BENNETT

GEORGIA QB, SENIOR

Through Week 7

- 2,033 passing yards (9th in FBS)
- 70.7 completion pct. (6th in FBS)
- Team record/AP rank: 7-0/No. 1

Photograph by
CARLOS M. SAAVEDRA



**CALEB
WILLIAMS**

USC QB, SOPHOMORE

Through Week 7

- 1,971 passing yards
- 19 TD passes
[T-6th in FBS], 1 INT
- Team record/AP rank:
6-1/No. 12

Photograph by
JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

HENDON HOOKER

TENNESSEE QB, SENIOR

Through Week 7

- 187.7 QB rating (2nd in FBS)
- 15 TD passes, 1 INT
- Team record/
AP rank: 6-0/No. 3

Photograph by

CARLOS M. SAAVEDRA



BRYCE YOUNG

ALABAMA QB, JUNIOR

Through Week 7

- 167.2 QB rating [14th in FBS]
- 16 TD passes, 3 INT
- Team record/AP rank: 6-1/No. 6

Photograph by
GREG NELSON



SCORECARD

GAMEPLAN p. 18

EATS p. 20

FULL FRAME p. 22

NEWSMAKERS p. 24

FACES IN THE CROWD p. 26





PAINT IT GREEN

QATAR'S WORLD CUP IS THE LATEST EXAMPLE OF A GROWING TREND: SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS CLAIMING TO BE FAR MORE ECO-CONSCIOUS THAN THEY REALLY ARE

► BY DAN FALKENHEIM AND ALEX PREWITT
► ILLUSTRATION BY DAVIDE BARCO

I**NSIDE THE** Legends Suite Club at Yankee Stadium, Allen Hershkowitz was sipping cabernet and recounting a video meeting he led for sustainability officials for the Qatar 2022 World Cup. An environmental scientist who also advises the NBA and MLS, Hershkowitz works full-time for the Yankees overseeing their sustainability efforts, the first person to hold that type of role in U.S. professional sports. He's become a go-to authority for teams, leagues and other organizations looking for direction on green initiatives. So in September 2021, when a colleague working with the World Cup organizers asked him to brief the Qatari group on best climate practices, Hershkowitz was eager to say yes.

This particular World Cup—featuring seven new stadiums, a new metro system and a (literal) small nation's worth of new air conditioning units, all brought to you by sponsors like QatarEnergy, the state-owned oil and gas

giant—has long been a notoriously climate-unfriendly affair. During Hershkowitz's presentation, one of the Qatar representatives spoke up with a bold claim: "We plan to announce that we're going to be carbon neutral and plastic neutral."

Hershkowitz recoiled at the suggestion: "I said, 'Please do not do that. Do not do that.'"

Alas, he was too late. The day before, Qatar's Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy (SC) boasted in a press release that it would "deliver a plastic-neutral tournament," going on to explain that by "physically removing plastic waste from rivers and oceans . . . the amount recovered will be equivalent to the plastic waste generated from the hosting of the FIFA World Cup."

While this particular post later disappeared from Qatar 2022's official website—fishing out old soda bottles does not negate the environmental impact of fabricating massive amounts of new plastic—the World Cup organizer has continued to tout its tournament as carbon

neutral. This despite the fact that, by its own conservative calculation, staging the 28-day tournament will generate 3.6 million metric tons of carbon dioxide, an increase of 67% from Russia 2018.

Qatar 2022 carbon neutral? “There’s no way in the world,” Hershkowitz says, adding, “There’s no such thing as plastic neutral.”

A spokesman for the SC responded, “We committed in our sustainability strategy to deliver the world’s first carbon-neutral FIFA World Cup, and we are on track to meet this goal.” The spokesman also listed Qatar 2022’s green initiatives and said it would buy “certified and recognized” carbon credits to offset unavoidable emissions.

To climate experts such as Hershkowitz, though, this playbook represents a classic case of what is known as greenwashing.

“Greenwashing is the notion that you’re signaling virtuous behavior with respect to environmental objects, often climate, but in reality it’s just a signal,” says Roger Pielke, professor of environmental studies at the University of Colorado.

The corporate world is awash in such behavior—JetBlue, for example, brags about carbon-neutral flights, a literally impossible task for non-avians—and sports is catching up.

On one hand, the direct environmental impact of sports tends to be more limited than people may think: According to data analyzed by Pielke and his colleagues, the collective annual emissions of the NFL, NBA and NHL account for just about a minute and a half of the U.S.’s annual footprint.

On the other hand, the sports world is rife with teams, leagues and organizations failing to fulfill even the most basic aspects of their environmental commitments. Certainly no scientist expects the



CHARGED UP

Qatar (above) could take a lesson from the Buffs, who lead the pack on green policy.

World Cup—or any other league, team or tournament—to solve climate change. But several who spoke to SPORTS ILLUSTRATED said sports can play a positive role.

As many of these experts noted, sports organizations possess unparalleled influence over fans, not to mention considerable leverage over sponsors and business partners. What they say and do matters. Especially when they say one thing and do another.

IN OCTOBER 2017, representatives from both the sports and environmental science worlds converged on Bonn, Germany, for a two-day United Nations workshop. The organizers were

curious whether the sports groups in attendance—among them FIFA, UEFA and the Philadelphia Eagles—could use their platforms to speak to fans about the urgent need for climate action. But the response was clear: The teams and leagues felt like they couldn’t talk before improving their own efforts.

From those conversations, the U.N.’s Sports for Climate Action Framework was born. Unveiled at the following year’s U.N. climate summit, the initiative lacked concrete targets at its onset by design. Instead, the framework bound signatories to intentionally broad principles, including a pledge to “reduce overall climate impact.” The framework also instructed signatories to calculate a baseline footprint by measuring greenhouse gas emissions as a “starting point.”

In short order, sports organizations raced to put their



DUSTIN BRADFORD/GETTY IMAGES



brand names to the framework: More than 300 of them signed on, ranging from large federations like the IOC to leagues like the NBA and the NFL, to clubs like the Yankees, Warriors and Liverpool FC, to smaller outfits like Grandma's Marathon in Duluth, Minn., and the Austrian Ocean Race Project.

Many of the signatories were eager to brag about their commitments to the program, soaking up the good publicity. But far fewer actually followed through on their promises. One year after the framework was instituted, in 2019, the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change conducted a survey asking whether signatories were measuring greenhouse gas emissions. "At that time, there were 249 signatories," says Hershkowitz, who participated in one of the framework's working groups. "Over 60% had not begun the measurement process."

The UNFCCC is starting to crack down. Last year, the body began requiring signatories to file a report that detailed their organization's emissions and the actions being taken to reduce them. Yet Lindita Xhaferi-Salihi, the lead on sports and fashion at the UNFCCC, says that roughly a third

of signatories failed to do that. Those organizations that didn't report by the end of August lost their accreditation with the framework.

Going forward, she adds, public reporting of emissions will be required to maintain signatory status. In a departure from its more lenient

earlier guidelines, late last year the UNFCCC also set hard targets for new signatories, including reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 50% by 2030 and reaching net zero by '40. Soon, all signatories will have to adopt those benchmarks; not doing so could lead to being booted from the program, Xhaferi-Salihi says.

Hershkowitz, for his part, does not currently advise his clients to publicly report their impact data. There is too much disagreement on how indirect impacts should be measured—for instance, how you measure the emissions from making

"IF YOU SIGN UP AS A SPORTS ORGANIZATION AND THEN YOU THINK THAT...BY USING YOUR TWITTER NOW AND THEN, YOU'RE DONE," XHAFERI-SALIHU SAYS, "I DON'T THINK THAT DOES IT."

the plastic cups sold at stadiums, or even the production of the ball—he says. "You want to make sure that whatever you put out in the public is true and verifiable," he says. "The NBA, the Yankees and MLS—I have told them we're not going public with it. . . . Right now, getting that data is a moving target."

For Xhaferi-Salihi, though, that type of explanation doesn't wash. For progress, she believes, there must be public accounting, even if imperfect. "If you sign up as a sports organization and then you think that by putting a signature, you're done, and by maybe using your Twitter now and then, you're done—I don't think that does it," she says. "Sustainability, at the end of the day, unfortunately, it's not just about storytelling; it is about numbers."

THE TRUTH IS, many of the sports organizations that signed onto the U.N. framework are good arguments for more accountability.

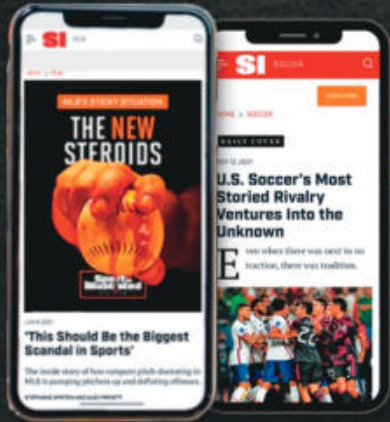
Ahead of the last Winter Games, for instance, the IOC issued breathless press releases heralding how every venue in Beijing would be fully powered by renewable energy, but it glossed over how Beijing 2022 diverted enough groundwater to make the 1.2 million cubic meters of fake snow that carpeted every ski slope or that it bulldozed part of a mountainous nature reserve to build the bobsled, skeleton and

luge center. "Sustainability in the Olympics has . . . significantly declined over time," an academic paper in the spring 2021 edition of the journal *Nature* concluded.

The sports world is full of similarly performative actions, from one-off composting nights at stadiums to the fleet of

Sports Illustrated

GO BEYOND THE MAGAZINE



SI.COM

Get breaking news, live scores, and behind-the-scenes stories from the greatest writers in sports.



PODCASTS

Listen to the podcast that suits your interests, and hear our experts break down the latest in the sports world.



NEWSLETTERS

From MLB and NFL coverage to fantasy insights and more, sign up for any of our newsletters for the latest updates.



COMMEMORATIVES

Celebrate championship wins and historic sports moments with collectible issues.

Get *Sports Illustrated* anywhere.



www.si.com/anywhere





CAP AND SPRAYED

The IOC has pledged to reduce its footprint, but the recent Beijing Games required a vast amount of man-made snow.

battery-powered, hydrogen-fueled trucks that delivered beer to SoFi Stadium for Super Bowl LVI. But the most common move in the greenwashing playbook, according to experts, is to buy carbon offsets.

While some types of offsets purchased by companies are productive, many are viewed by experts as worse than useless. There is what Texas A&M professor of sport management Brian McCullough describes as a cottage industry of “rogue, non-legitimate carbon offset programs” that lure teams and other clients with cheap costs and easy PR but lack transparency as to how that money is actually helping the environment. McCullough adds that offsets based on planting new trees—one of the most common types—are particularly problematic, as a tree takes decades to mature and begin absorbing carbon from the atmosphere yet does nothing to help with the emissions supposedly

being offset today. “It’s really the Wild Wild West,” McCullough says.

He argues that buying offsets should be a “last-case scenario” for a sports organization, but he sees many starting their green efforts by cutting a check. “It’s a quick fix,” he says. Furthermore, the fuzzy math often involved in calculating offsets can lead to even more exaggerated claims. “To claim carbon neutrality is quite frankly B.S., but a lot go down that path because it becomes an institutionalized practice,” he says. “One team does it, then others follow.”

McCullough encountered this in 2019, when he was working at Seattle University and MLS’s Sounders declared themselves the first carbon-neutral soccer team in North America and the first carbon-neutral pro sports team in the U.S. Trying to check their underlying data, though, McCullough hit a roadblock: The team, he says, wouldn’t share numbers. The Sounders declined comment to SI.

SO WHAT SHOULD fans demand from their favorite teams and leagues? And what role should sports be playing?

Earlier this summer, at a sports conference in Odense, Denmark, Pielke took the stage and delivered a talk titled, “How Not to Greenwash.” Near the end, below a bullet point describing carbon offsets as “gimmicks,” Pielke listed three broader “alternatives” for sports organizations looking to make an environmental impact: “educate fans about the scale of the issue”; “promote policies that work to decarbonize energy systems”; and “consider other [environmental social governance] objectives beyond climate where action of sports organizations can have a more direct impact.”

Put another way, he was asking sports organizations to use their considerable social and financial capital for good.

“The biggest plus that sports has is the influence over fans,” says Dave Newport, director of the Environmental Center at the University of Colorado. Teams can “empower fans to be more sustainable at home, work and play,” he says.

Since 2008, Newport has also led the charge at Colorado, launching the first dedicated sustainability program inside a Division I athletics department. One result: At CU football games, the university says 90% of waste is now diverted.

Newport believes businesses’ making overly exuberant claims about environmental policies is actually a good sign. “Personally, I love greenwashing,” he says, “because it’s the first step toward real action. You get caught, you take a hit in sales, you have to clean it up.”

“I don’t really care what the motives are, so long as it’s real. The atmosphere doesn’t give a s--- about how the carbon got up there. Just how much.” □

GAMEPLAN: THE SMART FAN'S GUIDE TO RIGHT NOW

BRONZE AGE

HOW A NOT-SO-ENDEARING TEAM BOUNCED BACK FROM A HUMILIATING THIRD-PLACE FINISH IN 2004

WATCH

THE REDEEM TEAM Streaming on Netflix

There's no more common trope in a sports movie than the lovable underdog overcoming long odds. That makes the success of Netflix's *The Redeem Team* so impressive. The squad at the documentary's heart is neither lovable nor an underdog. It's the U.S. men's Olympic basketball team, which thrashed everyone for years as amateurs, then when that didn't work anymore brought in NBA ringers to start the thrashing anew—only this time with more dissing of developing nations. When the U.S. got its comeuppance at the 2004 Games, losing in the semis to Argentina, not many people felt sorry for them, especially at home. No one spares a thought for Elon Musk when Tesla stock is off a couple of points.

So *Redeem* wisely never sets the 2008 squad up as a scrappy bunch of up-and-comers. ("The money and the

greed of the NBA—is that having an effect upon our competitive nature?" former U.S. coach George Karl is shown asking after his team finished sixth at the '02 world championships. "Yeah, you could write that.") That's not to say there's no drama. The success of the '08 group hinged on Mike Krzyzewski (who, in all of his uncensored glory, rains down f-bombs like so many Kobe Bryant floaters) being able to manage the team's substantial egos and get buy-in from some notorious lone wolves.

But ultimately the best thing about *Redeem* is the access, how it pulls back the curtain and shows a vivid portrait of what makes the best players in the world just that. You might laugh; you certainly won't cry (unless you're a big Pau Gasol fan), but you will likely come away with a new appreciation for the team, even if it's a grudging one.

—Mark Bechtel



BOB ROSATO

I'm **Mplified**
**BECAUSE I HAVE A PLAN
FOR MY FUTURE**

The body's response to weight loss can make weight management as challenging as actually losing the weight. But now that I understand how everyone's body can react differently to weight loss, I can work with my health care provider to create a personalized plan just for me.

Everyone has a different story when it comes to their weight. What's yours?



*Learn more at
TruthAboutWeight.com*



EATS: FOOD. DRINK. CULTURE. SPORTS

NOODLING AROUND

HOW DO YOU FEED A TEAM OF HUNGRY COLLEGE BASKETBALL PLAYERS? IF YOU'RE TOM COLICCHIO, WITH LASAGNA



AS RECRUITING enticements go, this one was pretty appealing. In May, Tom Colicchio tweeted that if former Baylor small forward Matthew Mayer chose to transfer to North Carolina, Colicchio (*left*) would go to Chapel Hill and cook the team dinner. Alas for the Heels, Mayer picked Illinois.

Colicchio, the top judge on Bravo's *Top Chef* (the 20th season of which will air in the spring),

is a longtime Tar Heels fanatic. He met Dean Smith in the 1980s through a friend, whose father was former UNC player Tommy Kearns. Over the years Colicchio and Smith became close; the coach would eat at Colicchio's restaurants and leave him tickets when the Heels played at Madison Square Garden. "When I had Gramercy Tavern," Colicchio says, "we had our share of celebs come in. But no one got the response Dean did. Every guy would come over and shake his hand."

Colicchio's ploy to strengthen the team didn't work, but he says he'd gladly still cook if coach Hubert Davis asked. As for what he'd make: "Italian food is pretty universal, so something big, like lasagna." And for a pregame side dish: "Garlic bread. That would be a good defensive option." —M.B.

TOMATO, ZUCCHINI AND EGGPLANT LASAGNA

Recipe courtesy of Tom Colicchio



INGREDIENTS

1 cup ricotta cheese
1 large onion
2 small zucchini
1 medium eggplant
2 red bell peppers
8 tbsp olive oil
2 cloves garlic, sliced
1 bay leaf
3 sprigs basil, leaves picked
1 28 oz can whole tomatoes, crushed and juices reserved
1 box lasagna noodles
1 cup Parmesan, freshly grated
Kosher salt, ground pepper

DIRECTIONS

1. Wrap ricotta in cheesecloth and place it in a strainer set over a bowl. Drain for 45 minutes.
2. Cut vegetables into 1½"-by-½" strips.
3. Cook onions and garlic in 3 tablespoons of olive oil over medium heat for about 5 minutes. Add the peppers and cook for 1 to 2 minutes, then add zucchini and eggplant. Season with salt and pepper. Add bay leaf and continue stirring until vegetables begin to soften, about 5 to 8 minutes.
4. Add basil, tomatoes and reserved liquid. Cook for 5 minutes. Remove bay leaf; set mixture aside to cool.
5. Heat oven to 350°. Prepare lasagna noodles according to package instructions.
6. Brush medium baking dish with olive oil and line it with lasagna noodles. Cover noodles with about half of vegetable mixture, half of ricotta and ⅓ cup of Parm. Add another layer of noodles, repeat vegetables, ricotta and Parm, and top with last layer of lasagna noodles. Sprinkle remaining Parm over top and drizzle with 3 to 4 tablespoons of olive oil.
7. Bake for 40–45 minutes until top is golden and bubbling. Rest for 10 minutes. Serves 4 to 6.

GETTY IMAGES (LASAGNA); TOM PENNINGTON/GETTY IMAGES (MASCOT); PAUL MORIGI/GETTY IMAGES FOR 1/ST (COLICCHIO)



WELCOME

TO YOUR NEW FAVORITE SPORT

HIT THE RANGE. HAVE SOME FUN. KEEP IT SAFE.

A growing number of people from all walks of life have made the shooting sports a fun and competitive part of their recreational time with family and friends. Visit our website to learn more about how to start your shooting sports journey safely and responsibly.

★ ——— [SHOOTUNITED.COM](https://shootunited.com) ——— ★

© 2022 Olin Winchester, LLC





[FULL FRAME]

To receive the Full Frame newsletter in your inbox every other week, become a digital subscriber.

GO TO [SI.COM/SUBSCRIBE](https://si.com/subscribe) • FOLLOW @SIFULLFRAME

GLORY DAYS

PHOTOGRAPH BY
SIMON BRUTY

T **HERE'S A** reason that U.S. fans can take heart following their team's failure to qualify for the 2018 World Cup. After all, the best U.S. men's performance in recent history came on the heels of another unmitigated Cup disaster.

In 1998, the Yanks lost all three of their matches in France. Their subsequent run in 2002 required a

little good fortune. With a chance to win the group on the line, Landon Donovan (*above*) and the U.S. were pummeled by Poland in the round's finale. Portugal and South Korea could have both advanced out of the group with a draw in their match, a recipe for collusion. But when Portugal was reduced to nine men, South Korea played for the win, coming out on

top 1–0. Extended this lifeline, the U.S. beat Mexico in the round of 16 before losing to Germany in the quarterfinals.

For photographer Simon Bruty, the Americans' run coupled with the overall atmosphere made it one of the most memorable events he's covered. Says Bruty, who will shoot his seventh men's World Cup in Qatar, "Every game was bedlam." □

JOIN THE MOVEMENT TO ACCELERATE CANCER RESEARCH



Right now, most clinical information is not regularly shared with the researchers who are trying to uncover new information about cancer every day, **but you can help change that.** Patients can help accelerate research **by sharing their data and unique experiences.**

When patients stand together with researchers, they can unlock new discoveries and treatments. People with all types of cancer may be eligible to **join Stand Up To Cancer, Count Me In and more than 7,500 patients who have already participated in this mission** to accelerate the pace of cancer research.

**Find out more and sign up
to join the movement at
StandUpToCancer.org/CountMeIn**

Uzo Aduba
*Stand Up To Cancer
Ambassador*



Photo By
Matt Sayles



Count
Me
In

Stand Up To Cancer is a division of the Entertainment Industry Foundation (EIF), a 501(c)(3) charitable organization.

NEWSMAKERS

BULL MARKET

GET READY FOR A LOT OF BIG NAMES—AND BIG ARMS—TO BE ON THE MOVE WHEN MLB FREE AGENCY KICKS OFF

► BY WILL LAWS AND NICK SELBE

THERE WILL be plenty of money splashed on the 2023 MLB free-agency class. This winter a loaded crop of shortstops, three aces with a combined seven Cy Young Awards in their trophy cases and some guy who just hit 62 home runs while spending most of his time in center field will all hit the market.

Those are just a few of the standouts in SPORTS ILLUSTRATED's annual ranking of the top free agents, and there will surely be more outside of that core group to make a massive impact on next season and beyond. In compiling this list, there were some judgment calls to be made on players with options for 2023 and on who will actually be available—Nolan Arenado will likely not opt out of his deal with the Cardinals, while the White Sox will likely pick up Tim Anderson's club option. Check out the rest of the list on SI.com.



Did you expect anybody else? Judge's bet on himself is about to pay out massively, whether he re-signs with the Yankees or lands elsewhere. He'll likely call right field his home long-term, but that won't stop record-breaking offers to come following one of the best seasons ever.

ERICK W. RASCO (JUDGE); SIMON BRUTY (DEGROM); BRETT DAVIS/USA TODAY SPORTS (SWANSON); PETER AIKEN/USA TODAY SPORTS (ANDERSON); RICH SCHULTZ/GETTY IMAGES (EFLIN)



When he's on the mound, deGrom is indisputably one of the best pitchers on the planet. But he's made only 26 starts over the last two seasons, and he was great-but-not-quite-as-great this season as he was in an abbreviated 2021. Plus, he turns 35 next June.

Armed with a new changeup grip, Anderson was elite at inducing soft contact this year after pitching for four teams over the previous three seasons. The big question: Can he replicate that success outside L.A.'s elite player development system?



Remember him? A shoulder injury kept Conforto from signing with a team last offseason, but the ex-Met would be an intriguing add, given his track record when healthy.

1. **Aaron Judge** YANKEES / OF

2. **Trea Turner** DODGERS / SS

3. **Carlos Correa** TWINS / SS

4. **Xander Bogaerts** RED SOX / SS

5. **Dansby Swanson** BRAVES / SS

6. **Jacob deGrom** METS / RHP

7. **Carlos Rodón** GIANTS / LHP

8. **Willson Contreras** CUBS / C

9. **Edwin Díaz** METS / RHP

10. **Justin Verlander** ASTROS / RHP

11. **Brandon Nimmo** METS / OF

12. **Clayton Kershaw** DODGERS / LHP

13. **Chris Bassitt** METS / RHP

14. **Andrew Benintendi** YANKEES / OF

15. **Josh Bell** PADRES / 1B

16. **José Abreu** WHITE SOX / 1B

17. **Tyler Anderson** DODGERS / LHP

18. **Anthony Rizzo** YANKEES / 1B

19. **Jurickson Profar** PADRES / OF

20. **Nathan Eovaldi** RED SOX / RHP

21. **Taijuan Walker** METS / RHP

22. **Joc Pederson** GIANTS / OF

23. **Michael Conforto** UNSIGNED / OF

24. **Kenley Jansen** BRAVES / RHP

25. **Zach Eflin** PHILLIES / RHP

Swanson morphed into MLB's best defensive shortstop this year to more than double his career-high WAR (5.7) total and earn his first All-Star nod. But his bat is still a cut or two below the shortstops noted above him.



The 39-year-old is the heavy favorite to win his third Cy Young after leading the majors in ERA (1.75) and WHIP (0.83) while going 18–4. Verlander, who played this season on a one-year deal worth \$25 million, may seek to surpass Max Scherzer's record annual average value of \$43.3 million on a short-term deal.

Eflin's underlying stats indicate Philadelphia's traditionally poor defense has let him down in recent years. There's a chance he and the Phillies will exercise his \$15 million option. If not, the 28-year-old could be a nice under-the-radar addition elsewhere.





FACES IN THE CROWD

► By DECLAN WALSH ► Photograph by GABRIEL MAYBERRY

JESSE GRUPPER

Hometown: **Montclair, N.J.**

Date of Birth: **Jan. 6, 1997**

Sport: **Sport Climbing**

Discipline: **Lead**

World Ranking: **No. 3**

► **LAST YEAR** Jesse Grupper was faced with a career-altering decision: Should he continue full-time at the Harvard Biodesign Lab, where he designed technology to help stroke patients regain mobility, or should he return to the World Cup climbing circuit? (The 25-year-old had stepped away from competitive sport climbing in 2020.)

Itching to test his body in his athletic prime, he chose the latter. Within a four-week span this

summer Grupper took bronze, silver and finally gold in men's lead World Cup events in Austria, Switzerland and France—the first three podium finishes of his adult climbing career. He won gold again in September in Edinburgh, Scotland, boosting him to third in the International Federation of Sport Climbing's world ranking.

"To win the event I hadn't even made the semifinals of before felt

surreal,” Grupper says of his first gold medal win. “I haven’t smiled so much in one night; my face was hurting so much.”

Through climbing and engineering, Grupper has defined his athletic and professional career by exceeding the body’s limitations. At the lab, Grupper helped design equipment to aid rehabilitation and boost mobility, including a soft robotic glove to assist patients in physical therapy exercises. He has shifted to a part-time role, but he continues to extend his good work beyond the lab. He helped establish USA Climbing’s diversity, equity and inclusion committee and has a long-term goal of using his biodesign background to make climbing more available to everyone.

“I think there’s potential to create technology that allows the sport to be more accessible,” says Grupper, who started climbing when he was 6. “Whether it’s as abstract as making exoskeletons or as simple as just designing clothing.” □

UPDATE

LEAP OF FAITH

► **IN EARLY** August, Jenna Bike sat in soccer limbo. The right back had made her pro debut with the NWSL’s Gotham FC, but her short-term deal had expired, and she was practicing without a contract.

Bike, 24—who appeared in the Feb. 8, 2016, edition of *FACES IN THE CROWD*—had stepped away from her nursing doctorate program at Boston College,

where she was a two-time team captain. Bike (*above, in black*) worked as a nurse during the pandemic and now feared she had left her field for nothing. Her doubts were assuaged when a deal came through.

Bike made nine appearances for the Goths by season’s end. “I’m so thankful that I stuck with it. I kept working hard and thought, hopefully, one day, I’ll get rewarded,” she says. “And thankfully, I was.”



NICOLE JOHNSON ► Sport: **Golf** ► Hometown: **Edwardsville, Ill.**

Nicole, a senior at Edwardsville High, shot a six-under-par 138 to win the Class 2A state title at Hickory Point Golf Course in Decatur, Ill. On her way to becoming the school’s first girls golf state champion, she bogeyed just once, notching the two-round state tournament’s fourth-lowest score. She also became the first large-school golfer to win the regional, sectional and state championships in the same postseason since 2018.



ATHENA FRANCILISO ► Sport: **Tennis** ► Hometown: **Rapid City, S.D.**

Athena, a sophomore at St. Thomas More High, defeated Sydney Tedrow of Pierre 6–3, 6–0 to win the Flight 1 singles state championship, dropping one set across her four-match title run. Athena also partnered with freshman Shriya Gangineni to win the Flight 2 doubles state title in an abbreviated 8–3 victory.

NOMINATE NOW

To submit a candidate for *Faces in the Crowd*, email faces@si.com.

For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow [@Faces_SI](https://twitter.com/Faces_SI) on Twitter.

HOLIDAY 2012



AND OPENED EVERY YEAR SINCE.

EMILEE CHINN/GETTY IMAGES (PULISIC); ULRIK PEDERSEN/DEFODI IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (MBAPPE);
RICH GRAESSLE/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (MESSI); GUALTER FATIA/GETTY IMAGES (RONALDO)



The **BIGGEST TOURNAMENT IN THE WORLD** will kick off in the smallest country ever to host it. Thirty-two teams, including seven of the eight sides to have won the Cup (sorry, Italy) and some exciting, long-absent ones (welcome back, Canada and Wales), will assemble in a nation the size of Connecticut

U.S. manager Gregg Berhalter got a team of newcomers to trust him—and one another.

Now his **HISTORICALLY YOUTHFUL SQUAD** will look to make a statement in Qatar

Sergino
Dest

Weston
McKennie



Christian
Pulisic





Tyler Adams

YOUNG AND HUNGRY

WORLD CUP
QATAR 2022

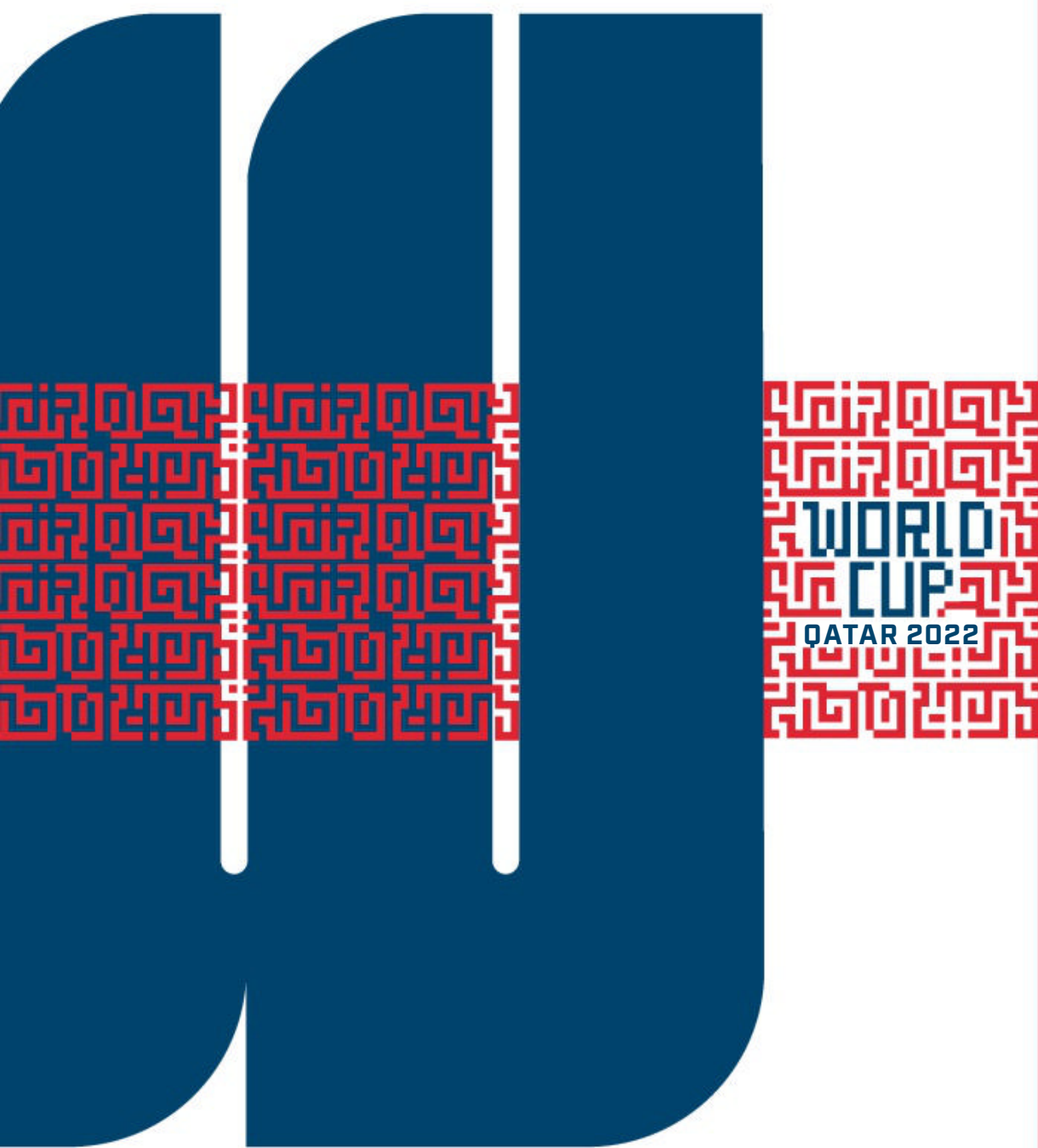


Brenden Aaronson



Gio Reyna

BY
BRIAN STRAUS
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
THOMAS LOVELOCK



WHEN TEAM SECURITY notified Gregg Berhalter that four of his younger players didn't return to their hotel until 4 a.m., the relatively new coach had a decision to make: He could either display his power or he could choose to share it.

Berhalter had been on the job for about seven months when the 2019 Concacaf Gold Cup, his first meaningful competition as U.S. men's national team manager, began. The youth movement the Americans are riding to this month's World Cup had barely started. But Berhalter knew it was coming, and it informed his response that morning.

The Americans' traumatic failure to qualify for the 2018 tournament had been like a forest fire that cleared away older, larger trees while making room for new growth. When he interviewed for the job, the former U.S. defender sat with federation executives and detailed what was taking root. "I showed them where the player pool could go based on these young talents that we have that are still in this formation phase: *They're not ready now, but they could be ready*," Berhalter says.

Young men may not be ready for the rigors of a World Cup qualifying campaign, not to mention the unique stress of the tournament itself. They may think that straggling in shortly before sunrise, even with the next match



ADRIAN MACIAS/IMAGO



QUIETING THE DOUBTERS

Pulisic and the USMNT silenced critics, winning two Concacaf trophies and qualifying for the 2022 World Cup.





QATAR 2022

three days away, is O.K. There's a reason, after all, that the average player age of World Cup winners is just under 27. Berhalter and his staff knew they were laying a foundation designed to underpin something far larger than that Gold Cup. They planned to use youth as the foundation of a team that could compete in Qatar.

So, that morning, instead of discipline, there was dialogue.

"It was about, 'O.K., guys, we need to align our expectations here. We're in a freaking tournament. We're trying to win. We're not here to go out. . . . But if you need to be with family, friends, whatever you want to do [after a game], you guys come to me with a curfew you think is reasonable,'" Berhalter remembers telling his players.

The next day, after a team meeting, they did—2:15 a.m.

"I was like, '2:15? Really? How did you guys come up with 2:15?'"

Well, they don't get back from the stadium until around 11 p.m. Then there's a team meal, and after you add a couple of hours to go out, you get 2:15. Obviously.

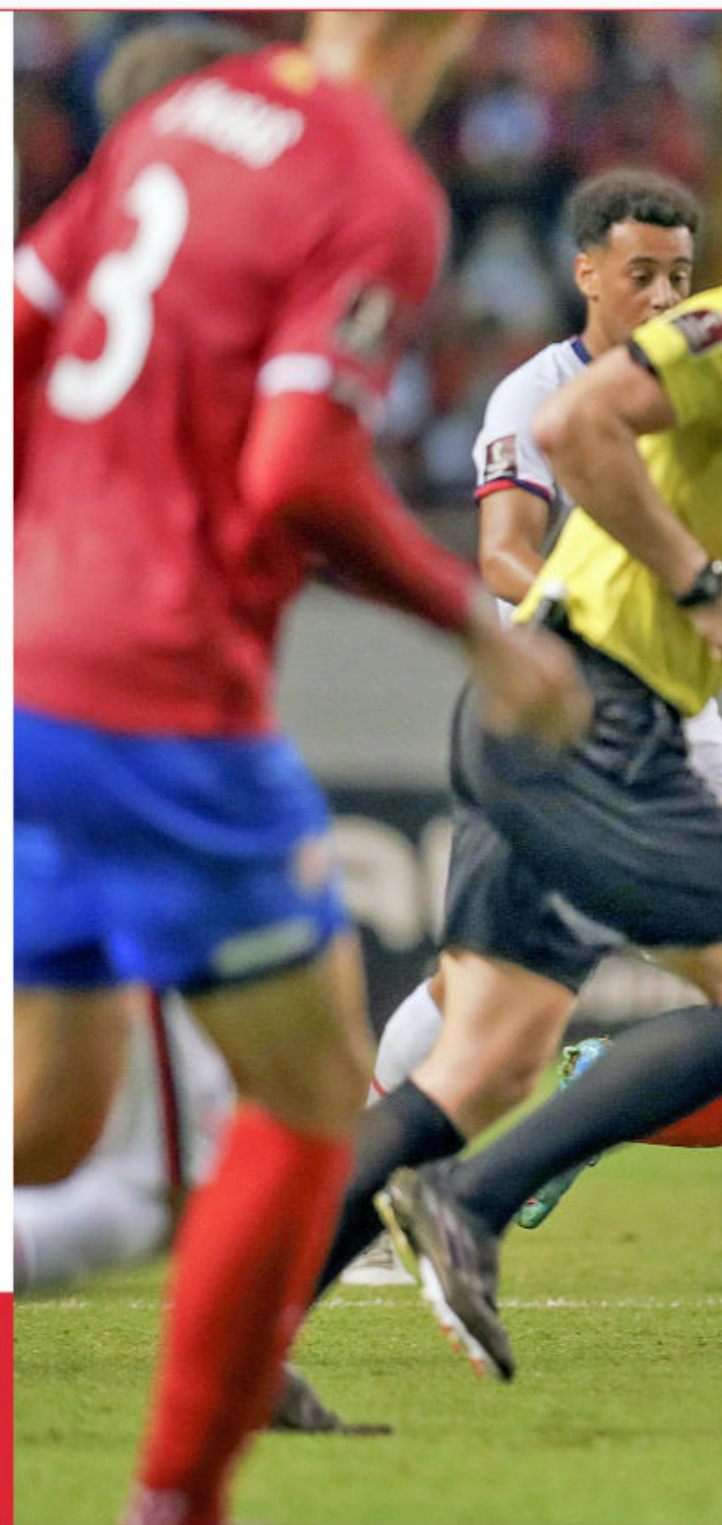
"I go, 'Done. 2:15,'" Berhalter says, laughing. "It was funny to be negotiating with these guys."

It was crucial, too. This is the generation that's supposed to, as Berhalter says frequently, "change the way the world views American soccer." The players had to feel empowered, and at the same time they had to see the coaches as colleagues on their journey.

"It's a huge thing, that you feel that you can go and talk to [the coaches] and say, 'Hey, I think we should do this.' With younger kids, that's really important," says DeAndre Yedlin, the 29-year-old Inter Miami defender who's one of only two players in the U.S. pool with World Cup experience. "They feel, *This is also my team. I also have a say. I helped formulate this culture and this balance.*"

THERE ARE COUNTRIES that produce talent on a sustained, industrial scale. But nations below that tier experience ebbs and flows. Berhalter, U.S. men's GM Brian McBride and U.S. Soccer sporting director Earnie Stewart, who all came aboard following the 2017 qualifying disaster, were part of a cohort that reached the World Cup quarterfinals in '02. But that run, sparked by 20-year-old phenoms Landon Donovan and DaMarcus Beasley, was an anomaly.

The effort to establish a more reliable player development culture kicked off in the mid-2000s



as U.S. Soccer introduced its academy platform (now operated by MLS), a scheme inspired by those offering the sort of professional coaching and training regimens found in more established soccer countries. MLS mandated free-to-play youth sides managed by professional coaches. Kids, as they are across the rest of the planet, would be taught to play rather than pressured to win. Four years ago commissioner Don Garber said MLS clubs were spending a total of around \$100 million annually on youth development. This generation represents the return. Among the 38 players Berhalter deployed during World Cup qualifying, 17 were forged at MLS academies, and six others spent at least a season with an MLS youth outfit. There are now MLS products at clubs in the English Premier League, Germany's Bundesliga, Italy's Serie A and France's Ligue 1.



SHOE VALUE

Berhalter (far left) has gotten results with fellow sneakerhead Weah (20) and the 19-year-old Musah (6).

“It’s definitely not an accident,” McBride says. “Certainly a large part of it is the standards that were put in place that the academies had to follow, and then coaching got better. It didn’t happen overnight.”

In the summer of 2021, shortly after Chelsea’s Christian Pulisic, then 22, became the first American man to play in and win the UEFA Champions League final, Berhalter split his player pool into an MLS-heavy roster and a predominantly Europe-based squad and claimed both the Concacaf Nations League and Gold Cup titles. By the time World Cup qualifying began in September, the coaching staff was asking U.S. Soccer staffers for data on how their team compared to the rest of the world. If the tentative and uneven 1-0-2 start didn’t reveal the squad’s relative inexperience, the numbers certainly did.

During that September 2021 stretch, Berhalter’s starting XIs averaged 23.91 years old—the youngest of the nearly 90 countries for which U.S. Soccer had data. Norway’s average, which was the second youngest, was more than a full year older. By the time qualifying concluded this March, the U.S., which finished 7-3-4, had fielded the eight youngest individual starting lineups among the 95 sides that advanced to the final round of their respective continental competition (except Oceania). The second-youngest team to book passage to Qatar, Ghana, started players who averaged nearly two years older (25.67 to 23.83).

Berhalter referenced his group’s youth with the press and public far more frequently than he did with his players, but as the Americans celebrated qualification in San José, Costa Rica, the manager told them, “We’ll be the youngest team in the World Cup in 2022, boys, the youngest team. And guess what? We’re going to f---ing do some damage.”

Outside the locker room at the Estadio Nacional, Pulisic said, “I just don’t think it’s about age. We have a hungry team—a hungry bunch of guys who are playing at top-level clubs across the world. And I think we can go in with confidence no matter what and no matter our age.”



WHEEL DEAL

Adams, Pulisic and McKennie (from left) pedaled in Spain before a draw with Saudi Arabia in a friendly.

That hunger, the sort that spurred Pulisic to leave central Pennsylvania for Borussia Dortmund at the age of 16, is fundamental to the culture and environment Berhalter started building with that Gold Cup negotiation. A World Cup champion as a player for West Germany in 1990, he wanted his charges constantly on their toes and ready to respond to changing tactics, unpredictable or counterintuitive lineups, fluid schedules and the whims of their all-powerful manager. Berhalter and his staff, conversely, trust the players to provide the motivation. In exchange, they've worked on creating an environment that prioritizes chemistry, cohesion and compromise—one tailored expressly for a generation of players who prize individual expression and connection with others in equal measure. National team camp now is a

place of kinship and support, as well as a stage for American soccer's vanguard to realize its potential. Every element is accounted for, both on the field (Berhalter is somewhat notorious for his attention to positional and strategic detail) and off (even the games available in the players' lounge, from Ping-Pong and board games to VR golf, were selected with their preferences and energy in mind).

JURGEN KLINSMANN, who coached the U.S. from 2011 until the wheels started falling off the '18 qualifying campaign, believed in building teams through discomfort. A World Cup champion as a

player for West Germany in 1990, he wanted his charges constantly on their toes and ready to respond to changing tactics, unpredictable or counterintuitive lineups, fluid schedules and the whims of their all-powerful manager. Berhalter and his staff, conversely, trust the players to provide the motivation. In exchange, they've worked on creating an environment that prioritizes chemistry, cohesion and compromise—one tailored expressly for a generation of players who prize individual expression and connection with others in equal measure. National team camp now is a

The U.S. has no captain, although Berhalter plans to have the players select one for the duration of the World Cup. Instead, a "leadership council" of around a half dozen players (including Pulisic and midfielders Weston McKennie and Tyler Adams) has served as the de facto link between workers and management while providing on-the-job training for future potential captains. In November 2019, a few months after the



QATAR 2022

Gold Cup, the council informed Berhalter that afternoon practices, which had been scheduled to accommodate jet lag, were actually harder on players accustomed to morning training. Times were adjusted immediately. Team leadership also helped organize and unite the group behind public statements and support for racial justice and gun reform—messages that indicated what sort of nation this generation wants to represent.

In addition to the games and diversions—“It’s not like when you’re dealing with older players and they want to go to their room and nap,” says Berhalter—U.S. Soccer provides a team barista and barber, among other necessities or amusements. Energy abounds, and meetings have been shortened to adjust to the demographic decline in attention span. “Now it’s like 15 minutes where we start to red-flag it,” Berhalter says.

“It’s always about the group,” says Berhalter. “It’s always about how we make people welcome in the group, how the group is SUPPORTING EACH AND EVERY INDIVIDUAL.”

Coaches layer information through tailored video presentations and one-on-one conversations. Near-constant communication continues once camp is over, and the coaches keep track of which staffer should be reaching out to which player, whether to discuss their most recent club game or just check in.

Forward Tim Weah, 22, who won the 2020–21 Ligue 1 title with Lille, says the frequent contact was vital to enduring a long injury layoff during the previous season. Weah, who’s the son of former FIFA World Player of the Year and Liberian president George Weah, appreciates the emotional support as much as the chats with Berhalter about their shared shoe obsession.

“You can talk to them as peers. Obviously you have that respect because they’re your elders, but I can go to them and just start talking about

music, talk about sneakers. And I think that’s what creates a bond and I think they’ve done such a great job just keeping that space open,” says Weah, who’s also the team DJ. “They’re older than us, but they still have that connection to our generation, and I think that’s super dope.”

Coaches take part. They’ll play Ping-Pong with players on an afternoon off, join them in conditioning exercises and even adopt the same dietary restrictions during camp. “That’s done with the idea that we still want to make progress on the field,” says Berhalter. “So it’s to get something else on the field. It’s not just *O.K.*, *we’re going to give you this free time and forget about soccer*. Soccer is always the main thing, and team is always the main thing.

“We’re always fostering interactions. It’s always about the group. It’s always about how we make people welcome in the group, how the group is supporting each and every individual.”

That love—or “brotherhood,” as the players consistently call it—isn’t typical for national teams. They’re disconnected by definition, all-star squads that gather intermittently and then disperse for months. Players come and go, rise and fall. Internal fault lines, like those that emerged under Klinsmann, or simply a lack of familiarity and chemistry among men who spend so much time apart, can tank a talented squad.

“I play with guys that go to national teams. I know it’s not that way. A lot of the guys maybe aren’t as close or maybe they don’t want to be at camp. They want to go on summer vacation,” then 21-year-old forward Brenden Aaronson said in June, as the U.S. gathered for four games following the end of a long European club season. “But this is our time to play for the national team. We want to be with each other.”

Camp can be a refuge for young players trying to navigate the highest, most treacherous levels of the global game—a place where they know their role, know what’s expected and trust that their physical and mental well-being is valued. “I just love coming into the national team and sometimes, with long seasons and a lot of ups and downs, it can be very good to get away, and the national team is an amazing place for it,” Pulisic says.

The environment inside the U.S. squad also has acquired a reputation—and become a valuable recruitment tool. Dual nationals like Valencia midfielder Yunus Musah, a rising 19-year-old star born in New York City who could’ve chosen to play for England, Italy or Ghana; 22-year-old AC Milan defender Sergiño Dest, who was

eligible to represent his native Netherlands; and 20-year-old Glasgow Rangers attacker Malik Tillman, who played for Germany's youth teams, all committed their international futures to the U.S. For those who spent their upbringing further from American culture, the national team offers a chance to embrace those roots alongside others their age. Weah, who grew up in Brooklyn, spent the summer of 2021 showing Musah, who moved to Italy as a baby, around his hometown. This summer, Musah spent time in South Florida with McKennie, 24, and England-born defender Antonee Robinson, 25, among others. A group of U.S. players commandeered a van during the June camp in Cincinnati so they could introduce Tillman to Chick-fil-A.

Players on vacation will send texts of their adventures to their coach. "I get pictures of them on a boat or something," says Berhalter. "Just dumb stuff, but it's funny."

BERHALTER, 49, IS the father of four children. The oldest, 21-year-old Sebastian, was a Columbus Crew academy player while Gregg coached the MLS side and now plays for the Vancouver Whitecaps. Connecting with young pros, matching their energy and understanding their needs and motivations is part of who the elder Berhalter is. For all the research, consultation, planning and "intention" that goes into training and preparing the national team, the indefatigable Berhalter also seems to be naturally suited for the job. "It's just who I am," he says.

"He probably doesn't get enough credit for that: man-managing the individual, then you have to manage the whole team," says McBride. "He's very good at both."

A test of that management dexterity—a disciplinary situation far more precarious than that relatively benign Gold Cup incident—arose during last September's opening qualifying window. McKennie, the midfield dynamo who is in many ways the charismatic, boisterous face of this U.S. generation, violated the team's COVID-19 bubble ahead of the showdown with Canada in Nashville. Berhalter had to thread the needle: establish a standard of conduct while maintaining the allegiance of both the group at large and one of its most important players.

Berhalter sent McKennie back to his club, Juventus. He missed the tie against Canada, then the resounding 4–1 victory in Honduras three days later. But in October, McKennie was welcomed back enthusiastically, and he started in wins over Jamaica and Costa Rica.

"Weston's an unbelievable kid," says Yedlin. "But there was also the kind of thing where, as players we're looking like, *Is this gonna slide? Would this slide with the 26th player on the roster?* For us, it was honestly, especially in hindsight, very nice to see what [Berhalter] did."

McKennie was humbled yet revitalized. Yedlin says he returned to the team with added maturity. "I remember the next camp we were riding on the way to training, and Weston was reading a book. I've never seen Weston read a book! He's like, 'Oh, yeah, I got into reading,'" Yedlin says.

Even when punished, McKennie never felt betrayed or abandoned by

his coaches or teammates. The episode illustrated what's different now, and potentially galvanizing, about this U.S. program. "I've had moments in my life where I've had to handle them whenever I'm in national team camp. I've had heartbreaks. I've literally cried in front of Gregg," says McKennie. "I've had many situations where I can—any player can—really just go to someone on the coaching staff and sit down and have a life talk with them. That's beneficial for us outside of soccer. We're human beings."

by BEN LYTTLETON

THE KIDS ARE (MORE THAN) ALRIGHT

The U.S. isn't the only country sending youngsters to the World Cup. Here are five top rising stars who are poised to break out for their countries on the grand stage

McKennie's father, John, sent a tweet in November 2021 thanking Berhalter for "giving life lessons" to his son.

The journey ends, for now, in Qatar, where the U.S. will face Wales, England and Iran in the stiffest test of Berhalter's plan to turn the potential pitfalls of youth into an asset. England is a World Cup contender, while Wales and Iran were top-20 sides in FIFA's October ranking. The 16th-ranked Americans are inexperienced. They're also fit and relentless, playing a fast, vertical, high-pressing style that's a tactical outgrowth of the squad's youth and athleticism.

"[Berhalter] put in a plan in place that I don't think any national team coach has been willing to take the risk of doing," said Adams, the



QATAR 2022

23-year-old Leeds United midfield engine who's become an influential U.S. leader and performer.

Adams said Berhalter "basically chang[ed] the whole way the system would work inside and out, whether it was our tactics, the players that we wanted to have, what certain positions needed to do . . . basically how we can develop and get better."

The youngest U.S. World Cup squad in the MLS era was Bob Bradley's 2010 group winner, which averaged 27.28 years. To send a team

But France, England and other big names have failed spectacularly on the World Cup stage because they can be shadows of the vast sum of their parts. Ego and club rivalries have torpedoed countless campaigns. The relatively harmonious French side that eased to victory four years ago in Russia was a notable exception for a talent-rich country that's had famous difficulty establishing locker room harmony. Les Bleus coach Didier Deschamps declared following the 2018 final that the trophy was



RODRIGO

Brazil | Age: 21

The versatile forward is an elite finisher whose goals helped Real Madrid win the Champions League last season. He'll eventually wear Neymar's No. 10 shirt.



EDUARDO CAMAVINGA

France | Age: 19

France's youngest international in more than 100 years is a controlling midfielder who already looks the part at Real Madrid. Time to step aside, Paul Pogba.



JAMAL MUSIALA

Germany | Age: 19

Born in Germany but once an England U-21 international, the silky dribbler with an eye for the goal is already an indispensable player for Bayern Munich.



JUDE BELLINGHAM

England | Age: 19

Over the last two years, the midfielder has played more club minutes than any other teenager in Europe. He is a future English captain in waiting.



PEDRI

Spain | Age: 19

The two-footed inside midfielder makes passes that can take out a whole defense. He is often compared to Spanish legend Andrés Iniesta.

averaging below 25 to a World Cup is almost unheard of. According to U.S. Soccer, Ghana's entry in 2006 is the only one in the past four World Cups—that's 128 different rosters—to come in below that benchmark. Thirteen of Berhalter's 14 lineups during World Cup qualifying averaged under 25.

There's still a sobering talent gap, at least statistically. According to Transfermarkt, the German website well known for its player valuations, the U.S. had four men worth at least \$20 million as the summer transfer window closed: Pulisic, McKennie, Aaronson and Borussia Dortmund forward Gio Reyna. Reigning world champion France has 53—enough for two teams. England has 58.

won when he named his roster: "You need to choose the men," he said.

"It's character over talent," Berhalter says. "We're not going to have the most talent in the World Cup. So we have to gain an advantage in other areas, and our advantage is our brotherhood."

Never before has the U.S. featured players who were so accomplished, and so ambitious, so young. That's just one of many things this unique squad, this golden generation, has in common.

"We're not scared of anyone. We just love to compete," Weah says. "That's the mentality that this new generation has. We picked it up from the old heads. We love to compete, but we do it with such swagger. And it's just amazing to see." □



THE CHAMP IS HERE

BY
BRIAN STRAUS

PHOTOGRAPH BY
LeBRECHTMEDIA

41



After leading France to the 2018 World Cup title, **KYLIAN MBAPPÉ** became a global superstar. Now, in Qatar, the world's most expensive player will look to make his complicated country the first team to repeat as champions in 60 years



WORLD
CUP
QATAR 2022



EMMANUEL MACRON HAILS from the far north of France, but a significant piece of his heart belongs to the south. The politician is a lifelong fan of Olympique de Marseille, the storied Mediterranean club that has been eclipsed in recent years, having won its last national championship, a record-tying 10th, back in 2010.

The wait for an 11th title is all the more agonizing for supporters like Macron, because the team that's replaced L'OM atop Ligue 1 is its archrival, Paris Saint-Germain. Yet this past winter and spring, in a noteworthy example of choosing patriotism over partisanship, Macron committed himself to extending Marseille's drought.

He called Kylian Mbappé. Then called him again.

"It was a few calls," Mbappé says, laughing. "It was like December, January, February, March..."

Mbappé, the 23-year-old PSG star, was the focus of a protracted, headline-grabbing tug-of-war between his hometown team and mighty Real Madrid, soccer's most famous and decorated club. Mbappé was heading toward free agency, and, for many, his choice between

LIKE LIGHTNING
Mbappé has scored 28 times for France, most recently against Austria in September.



staying in Paris and leaving for Madrid, or between Ligue 1 and La Liga, was about a lot more than where he'd spend the next few seasons.

It was about weighing childhood dreams—he'd fantasized about wearing Madrid's iconic white since adolescence—against adult reality. It was a referendum on PSG's ambitious project, which is financed by Qatar's near-bottomless sovereign wealth fund, and the French league's fading stature among Europe's elite. And it was about balancing Mbappé's calculated designs on global renown with his increasing importance to his complicated country.

"[Macron] called and said, 'I know you want to leave. I want to tell you, you are also important in France. I don't want you to leave. You have an opportunity to write the history here. Everybody loves you,' " Mbappé recalls. "I said I appreciated it, because it's really crazy. The president calls you and wants you to stay."

Speaking to reporters in June, Macron acknowledged the conversations and said, "I believe it is my responsibility, as president, to defend the country."

Mbappé is an asset worth fighting for, even if he's in a rival club's colors. It was evident early that the boy from Bondy in the diverse, working-class Paris suburbs, or banlieues, was special. The son of a Cameroonian coach and a French Algerian former handball player, Mbappé spent a lot of his childhood on the small, concrete pitches of the banlieues, being coached by his dad at the local youth club and playing *FIFA*





QATAR 2022

with his brothers. (Mbappé's hands-in-the-armpits goal celebration was inspired by his brother after scoring in the video game.)

"You play football all the day and all the night. It's part of the culture of the country," Mbappé says. "There is no pressure. No, 'You have to become professional.' It's all ambition, but there is no pressure. It's all about to have this passion in your heart."

At 13, Mbappé was already being courted by Real Madrid. He took a trip to the Spanish capital to train and meet his idols—forward Cristiano Ronaldo, whose face covered the

walls of his bedroom, and sporting director Zinedine Zidane, whose trademark bald spot Mbappé wanted carved into his own scalp. After turning pro and winning his first Ligue 1 title with AS Monaco, he returned to Paris and PSG in a €180 million deal that made him the most expensive teenage player of all time.

As the 2018 World Cup kicked off, Nike posted billboards, including one on the Stade de France, featuring a smiling Mbappé and reading, '98 A ÉTÉ UNE GRANDE ANNÉE POUR LE FOOTBALL FRANÇAIS. KYLIAN EST NÉ.

"'98 was a great year for French football. Kylian was born."

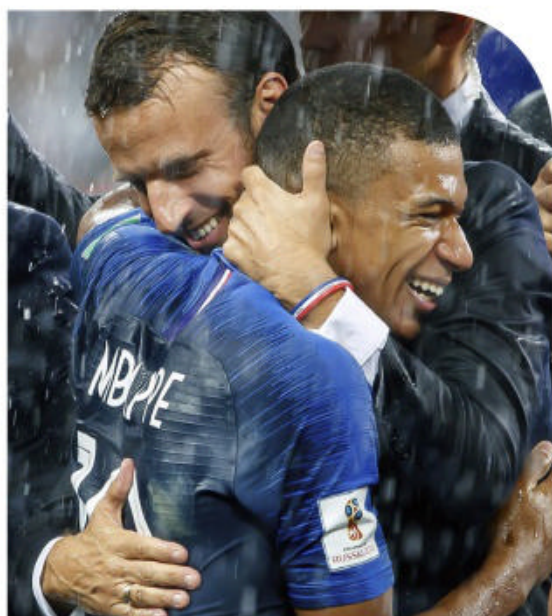
"You play football all the day and all the night. It's part of the culture of the country," Mbappé says. "There is no pressure. No, 'You have to become professional.' IT'S ALL AMBITION."

IN THE SUMMER of 1998 at that same arena in the banlieue of Saint-Denis, where the poverty rate is twice the national average, Les Bleus finally won the World Cup. They were the "Black-Blanc-Beur," the collection of Black, white and Arab players who led France to overdue glory with a 3–0 thumping of Brazil in the final. Inspired by the brilliant Zidane, the Marseillais son of Algerian immigrants, and featuring multiple minority stars and a sprinkling of men from the banlieues, that French side was supposed to herald a national reckoning regarding race, immigration and the potential for marginalized citizens to contribute to French society.

A generation later, the banlieues' impact has proved to be seismic. Eight members of France's 23-man squad at the 2018 World Cup in Russia hailed from the Paris suburbs, each of them the son of at least one immigrant. While the likes of N'Golo Kanté and Paul Pogba helped Les Bleus put a stranglehold on opponents, it was Mbappé who ripped them open. He stretched the field, adding welcome dynamism and excitement to an ultratalented team that spent a lot of the tournament in second gear.

Mbappé's speed, skill and effervescent confidence were too much for Lionel Messi's Argentina in an epic 4–3 round-of-16 encounter, during which Mbappé drew a penalty and scored twice. He then became the first teenager since a 17-year-old Pelé to score in a World Cup final, a 4–2 triumph over Croatia. Mbappé finished his debut World Cup with a gold medal, four goals, three displaced vertebrae (suffered three days before the semifinal) and the best young player award. Macron embraced and kissed Mbappé during the rain-swept trophy ceremony in Moscow.

The boy from Bondy was the prince the ad had promised, football's heir apparent to Zidane,



X'S AND O'S

After leading France to glory in 2018, Mbappé kissed the FIFA World Cup trophy and got a hug from Macron (above).



QATAR 2022

Messi and both Ronaldos. Mbappé was racing into the pantheon.

“That changed my life. After that World Cup, everything was different, because all the world [was] watching. And when you do something good it’s been crazy after,” he says. “I was famous before the World Cup, but not like this. It became crazy. It took me some time to [learn] to stay calm.”

Expectations soared. Mbappé hit his stride with PSG, winning multiple French and Ligue 1 player of the year awards. Meanwhile, Les Bleus were favored to claim the postponed European Championship in the summer of 2021. The margins at the highest level are fine, however, and boys from the banlieues tend to walk that tightrope. France lacked its World Cup spark at the Euro. Unconvincing during the group stage, the world champions then blew a late two-goal lead to Switzerland in the round of 16, and Mbappé missed the decisive penalty kick in the ensuing shootout. He finished the competition with no goals and so endured the sad phenomenon that seems to be increasingly popular across European soccer: a torrent of online racial abuse.

When you win, you’re French. When you don’t, you’re something else.

“Criticism of players for making mistakes and getting things wrong is a part of the spectacle of football. You come to boo and hiss,” says Lilian Thuram, a member of France’s 1998 Cup-winning team, through an interpreter. “But more fundamentally, the success of those who are not supposed to succeed in society, particularly people of color, that’s upsetting to some. And when Kylian misses a penalty, they’re waiting for that mistake.”

Thuram, 50, may have been the most complete defender of his generation. An immigrant from Guadeloupe and a product of the Paris banlieues, Thuram also came alive during that summer of 1998, anchoring France’s back line and scoring twice in the semifinal. Ahead of the 2022 World Cup, the robust but elegant defender still holds the record for Les Bleus appearances. His second career has been just as impactful. Thuram is an author, lecturer and one of France’s most visible antiracism activists. He continues to fight for team Black-Blanc-Beur nearly a quarter century after that promised reckoning.

“It’s all part of a wider racist backlash against players like Kylian Mbappé,” Thuram says.

“[Some people] don’t think they should escape from the banlieue.”

A post-Euro meeting with French Football Federation president Noël Le Graët, who’s been the focus of misconduct and harassment investigations and has been quoted denying the existence of racism in soccer, was brief and unproductive. Mbappé felt the FFF wasn’t backing him sufficiently. Not all presidents are so supportive, and so Mbappé felt he had no choice but to quit Les Bleus just a year-plus before the Qatar World Cup.

“I said, ‘I cannot play for people who think I’m a monkey. I’m not gonna play,’ ” Mbappé says. “But after, I take the reflection with all the people who play around me and root for me, and I think it was not the good message to give up. Because I think I’m an example for everybody.

“This is the new France. . . . It’s for that, that I didn’t give up the national team. Because it is a message to the young generation to say, ‘We are stronger than that.’ ”

*“The success of those who are not supposed to succeed . . . that’s upsetting to some,” says Thuram. “And when Kylian misses a penalty, they’re **WAITING FOR THAT MISTAKE**.”*

MBAPPÉ WAS RAISED eight miles northeast of central Paris, at the heart of the Île-de-France yet also, somehow, on the national periphery. Lots of problematic labels are affixed to the banlieues, with their gritty tower block housing, substantial immigrant populations, rough economic conditions, high unemployment and occasional violence. Bondy was toward the center of the 2005 riots triggered by the death of two teenagers who were electrocuted while hiding from the police in a power substation following a pickup soccer game. It can be a place where residents feel neglected, oppressed and isolated.

But they can also feel French.

“I feel French because I was born in France, and they gave me this opportunity to grow up normally,” Mbappé says. “People think a lot of things about the banlieue without going there. I learned a lot of values there. When I talk about it to people, they don’t think it’s real when I say, ‘Yeah, there is no problem there. There is not. It’s like everywhere.’ ”

Mbappé’s upbringing, which included flute lessons and Catholic school, was relatively comfortable thanks to his diligent parents, who remain his closest confidants and advisers (he

Kylian came and say, ‘Hello,’ to all my friends,’ ” Mbappé says. “And after, people asked me and I say, ‘It’s what I learned in the banlieue. . . . I was brought up with respect.’ If you come and take the hand, you take the hand of everybody.”

His pride and affection for the place, and his experiences representing France both triumphant and distressing, have bound Mbappé to his home in ways he may not have expected as a teen. That became clearer this spring as Macron phoned and then phoned again, and as the pressure to decide between Madrid and PSG increased. Most reports said Mbappé’s departure was inevitable, sealed but not signed, and when Madrid eliminated PSG from the Champions League in early March on the way to a record 14th European crown, it seemed like an omen.

PSG had Qatar’s billions and its acclaimed attacking trident of Mbappé, Messi and Neymar. But it was founded in 1970—the club is a toddler on the global stage—and it won just two domestic league titles before the 2011 Qatari takeover. A decade later, PSG has become a massive fish in a modest pond that, despite its largesse and ambition, had advanced to just one Champions League final (a ’20 loss to Bayern Munich).

Pedigree often makes a difference at the highest level. It tilts the field. Despite decades of elite talent production, Ligue 1 teams have lifted just a single European Cup (Macron’s Marseille in 1993). That inexplicable underachievement, and the accompanying derision, stands in contrast to the tradition and allure of Real Madrid, which seemingly wills itself to victory time after time. It did so with Zidane in the early 2000s, and Los Blancos now feature French stars like striker Karim Benzema, the European player of the year, and midfield prodigy Aurélien Tchouaméni. It’s always been the place to be.

That gravitas enticed Mbappé. But it’s one thing to win a 15th continental crown for Real Madrid—to become another in a lengthy line of conquerors—and quite another to win the first for Paris. Not many men from anywhere beyond Barcelona or Munich have won both the World Cup for their country and the Champions League for their hometown club.

So for a young man who never wanted to put limits on his ambition, an unexpected perspective emerged. Mbappé flourished during the 2021–22 campaign despite the scrutiny, leading Ligue 1 in goals and earning its player of the year award for the third time. He was the only

player cheered when the club returned to the Parc des Princes following its loss to Madrid. Mbappé soon realized that he could be the centerpiece or catalyst, and that achievement absent Real’s aura might mean even more. That high-risk, high-reward quest would quickly test his resolve, patience and maturity.



**TRIPLE
THREAT**
Mbappé [7]
teams with
Messi and
Neymar to
make up
PSG’s attack.

has no agent). That stability, plus a well-organized local athletics structure—the banlieues are like a footballing atom smasher ringing Paris that attract thousands of full-time coaches and scouts from around Europe—offered Mbappé an ideal launching pad. He delights in telling a story about his banlieue values that hinges on a meeting with José Mourinho at a FIFA awards ceremony, where Mbappé greeted the Portuguese coach and then each of his guests.

“I came and I say, ‘Hello,’ to José Mourinho because I know him—he is José Mourinho. But I say hello even to the friends, and José Mourinho did an interview and said, ‘I was shocked that





QATAR 2022

“I’m not scared. I’m ready,” he says. “I always talk about my ambition, what I want to do, and now it’s time.

“In Paris, the book is fully white. What an opportunity! You have to think differently. Of course, it was easier to go to Madrid. But I have this ambition. I’m French. I’m a child of Paris, and to win in Paris, it’s something really special—really special. It writes your name in the history of your country for life.”

His name was everywhere, anyway. This was LeBron James’s 2010 *Decision* in reverse. The new contract was eye-watering—three seasons and worth north of €250 million. Mbappé is now the highest-paid player in the world by a good margin (Messi and Neymar rank second and third). But he bristles when it’s suggested that his commitment was inspired by money.

*“It was easier to go to Madrid. But I have this ambition. **I’M FRENCH**. I’m a child of Paris,” Mbappé says. “And to win in Paris . . . it writes your name in the history of your country for life.”*

Mbappé was getting paid regardless, and he’ll be a free agent again at just 26. Instead, he claims, it was about opportunity.

“You can stay here to have success,” he says. “For us it’s a big message, because when I announced I stay, a lot of things change in the mentality of people. People start to say, ‘Yeah, we don’t need to go out. You don’t need to leave the country.’ ”

That’s a bold mission for a boy from the banlieues. But Mbappé believes times, and many attitudes, are changing. His generation is connected, global and idealistic, and Mbappé’s perspective on the platform his success affords reflects those modern attitudes. He aspires to the honors and heights of Messi and Ronaldo (neither has won a World Cup, but they’re indisputably the faces of the game), although Mbappé

is cut from a different cloth. He may have a superstar’s conceit at times, but he’s already more public and proactive beyond the field than other, older greats.

MBAPPÉ EARNED PLAUDITS in 2018 when he donated his \$500,000 World Cup check to the charity Premiers de Cordée, which gives free sports instruction to disabled and hospitalized children in France, and he continues to part with his national team fees even while battling the FFF over the governing body’s insistence that players make appearances for sponsors they may not support—fast food and gambling companies, in Mbappé’s case. In ’20, he launched a foundation, Inspired by KM, that aims to support 98 (there’s that number again) Parisian children ages 9 to 16 “until they begin their working lives.”

This summer, with the World Cup pushed to November, he visited the U.S. on perhaps the most high-profile marketing trip ever taken by a European footballer. Mbappé walked the red carpet at the NBA draft, kicked field goals with the Rams and announced the launch of a production company, Zebra Valley, that will produce and distribute content created by young and diverse artists. The outfit has already signed deals with WME Sports and the NBA. Mbappé, who is trilingual, is involved in meetings and wants to learn the business, something he doesn’t have to do this at this stage of his young career.

Mbappé will be criticized and scrutinized, especially as he becomes more important to France and PSG, as his contract ripples through the football economy and as he extends himself beyond the field. Tussle with Neymar over a penalty kick, as he did in PSG’s second Ligue 1 game of the new season, and global social media platforms, newspapers and talk shows grind to a halt. He’s been accused of demanding a say over PSG’s front office and player personnel (he denies it), and was linked to an outrageous September story concerning allegations from Pogba’s brother that the midfielder hired a witch doctor to curse Mbappé.

Then, in early October, a wave of reports (dismissed as “rumor” by Mbappé’s camp to SPORTS ILLUSTRATED) claimed that Mbappé was already so frustrated by PSG’s delay in keeping promises related to tactics and player personnel—help he believes he needs to fulfill his mission—that he was angling for a January exit. His desire to be the focal point, the man

who'd lead PSG to the promised land, quickly raised the personal and public stakes to a fever pitch.

"Kylian is aware of these pressures and he can deal with them. He has the mentality to face up to this and to overcome those challenges and critiques," says Thuram, whose sons, Marcus and Khéphren, intersected with Mbappé early in their careers.

"Part of Kylian's public profile and why he's so well known is because people know he does so much more than football. It is part of why he's such a celebrated figure," Thuram adds. "We talk a lot about the people who criticize, but most people love him. They absolutely love him."

That's why he was worth those presidential phone calls and worth Macron's supporter sacrifice. Mbappé is now the flag carrier for his generation, for the

banlieues and for a France still wrestling with old divisions. He embodies youthful potential, ambition and pride. He'll try to make Les Bleus the first team to win back-to-back men's World Cups in 60 years. The buildup has been brutal, with the aforementioned scandals and distractions piling up alongside multiple injuries to key contributors, including Pogba and Benzema, and surprising on-field setbacks. Historic and recent trends suggest this might not be France's year, despite its obvious quality.

If this World Cup doesn't go well, Mbappé will

by ALEX PREWITT

SONNY DISPOSITION

Son Heung-min, the Premier League's top goal scorer in 2021, is looking to lead South Korea out of the group stage for the first time since '10 and have a grand time doing it

BEFORE TOTTENHAM

Hotspur began its preseason tour through his native South Korea, star forward Son Heung-min went all out in obtaining welcome presents to give to his teammates upon their arrival. For four straight days he feted them with designer sunglasses and other swag donated by his lineup of global sponsors, in addition to personally purchased items like ornately decorated sets of chopsticks and spoons. "The expectations and pressure only got higher," Son says. "I didn't give anything after the fourth day, so the players were coming to me, asking, 'Any more gifts?'"

Son, who turned 30 just before the tour kicked off, didn't mind the razzing. "I think nobody in Europe really knew about South Korea. People [were] not really interested," Son says of his experience 14 years ago, when he first left home in the Gangwon province to join Hamburg's youth academy in Germany. Showing fellow Spurs players around Seoul and elsewhere this summer, however, he was pleasantly surprised by their eagerness to consume his culture—and not just when he treated the whole roster to Korean barbecue. "They are always asking so many questions," he says. "This

makes me really proud."

Clearly the country's screaming legions of Son lovers, hundreds of whom assembled near baggage claim at Incheon Airport in anticipation of Tottenham's arrival, feel the same about their national team captain for the upcoming 2022 World Cup. According to one projection, more than 12 million people in South Korea, out of a total population of roughly 51 million, count themselves as Spurs supporters. And that is without mentioning the expats who trek to Tottenham Hotspur Stadium during the Premier League calendar. "The lads," Son says, as in his teammates, "even when we play home games, they see all the Korean flags, they joke, 'Was it you buying all the tickets for the Korean fans?'"

Between his impeccable timing, effortless dribbling and breathtaking two-footed finishing—the ultrarare combination

of which last season helped him make history as the first Asian winner of the Premier League Golden Boot, netting 23 goals to share the award with Liverpool's Mohamed Salah—Son is more than worth the price of admission based on skill set alone. [Not for nothing, tickets to Tottenham's exhibition match against players from the local K League were reportedly being scalped for as much as \$3,000.] But the man nicknamed Sonny has also become one of soccer's hottest draws because of his eternally cloudless disposition: In summer 2021, Tottenham's official Facebook account posted a 34-second video titled, "The best of Heung-Min Son laughing." It now has nearly 750,000 views.

Asked in a recent interview to describe the importance of joy in his game, Son goes back to the beginning. "I need to laugh, I need to be happy, because without love you



QATAR 2022



FAVORITE SON

South Korea's most popular athlete battled Costa Rica in a September friendly before the World Cup.

don't get anything," he says. "I start[ed] to play football because I had love. I had a dream. That's why I'm standing here today."

EXACTLY TWO decades ago, cohost South Korea defied the odds to reach the semifinals in the 2002 World Cup, the first (and still only) time that an Asian Football Confederation squad had advanced that far. Among those enraptured by the national

team's upstart run was a 9-year-old Heung-min, who insisted on wearing the same red national team T-shirt to grade school every day. "I just remember the streets [were] all red—red shirts, red lights, red fireworks," Son says.

He recalls how the young star of that squad, midfielder Park Ji-sung, went on to become the first player from the continent to don the captain's armband for Manchester United and

have other chances, but he has no intention of wasting another opportunity to blaze a new trail.

"It's been my mentality since I'm young, is always to do more, to push the limits. For me it was not the end when I won the World Cup. It was the first chapter of something crazy," he says.

"It's so hard" to win two in a row, he concludes. "But if you want to write the history, you have to do something nobody do. So we're going to try. I think we have a good team. We're a good collective. The manager is the same. And we have the country behind us." □

capture championships in the Premier League and Champions League, instilling in Son a purpose that still resonates today. "Between [ages] 10 and 15, he was the biggest idol for me," Son says. "That makes me feel a big responsibility, because I want to be similar to him, to give a good example to the kids watching."

Son figures to serve a similar role in Qatar, but he has always handled his leadership duties with the same cheerful collectedness that defines his style. First named Korea's captain in advance of its 2018 World Cup finale in Russia, following an 0-2-0 start in group play that ensured the team wouldn't advance to the knockout stage, Son recalls joking to his coach upon receiving the news, "Look, I'll do anything you need, but don't blame me when I play like s---."

The immediate results were far from crappy, with Son striking for one of two extra-time goals to stun and eliminate

defending-champion Germany in what Korean media dubbed THE MIRACLE OF KAZAN. "One of the greatest memories I have," he says.

Whether Son can shoulder enough of a scoring load to lift FIFA's 28th-ranked squad past Portugal (ninth), Uruguay (14th) and Ghana (61st) in Group H—let alone recapture the magic of 2002—remains to be seen. And yet, even while poised to overtake Park and Ahn Jung-hwan for Korea's all-time World Cup goals lead—they're currently tied at three each—he rejects the notion that he is leading his teammates anywhere. "I don't feel like I'm a leader," he says. "More a friend. I just want everyone to be happy, to enjoy this moment and to feel comfortable. This is what is really important."

Put another way, the expectations and pressure may only be getting higher, but damned if that is going to stop Sonny from gleefully sharing his many gifts with the world. ○



When Qatar kicks off the opener against Ecuador on Nov. 20, it will have been **4,371 DAYS** since the tournament was awarded to a country the size of Connecticut. It has not been a quiet 12 years

BUILDUP THE

52

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
DECEMBER 2022
WORLD CUP PREVIEW

DEC. 2,
2010

Qatar is named host of the 2022 World Cup, beating out bids from, among others, the U.S. and Japan.



MARCH 19, 2015



FIFA confirms the 2022 World Cup will move from typical summer dates to winter, due to Qatar's extreme July heat.

Qatar's government announces a ban on public alcohol consumption during the World Cup, with the exception of "specific and far away places."



NOV. 9, 2016

2010

2011

2012

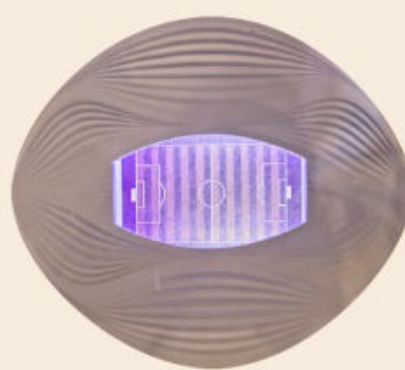
2013

2014

2015

SEPT. 25, 2013

An investigation by *The Guardian* reveals that dozens of Nepali migrant workers died in Qatar, many of them working on infrastructure projects for the World Cup.



MAY 19, 2014

Ground is broken on **Al Janoub Stadium**, the first of seven new tournament-specific venues, with the promise of a high-tech cooling system.

FEB. 7, 2017

Qatar's minister of finance earmarks \$500 million each week toward World Cup infrastructure projects: hotels, roadways and an entirely new community, Lusail City, where the tournament final will be played.



FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: MARWAN NAAMAN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; PRAKASH MATHEMA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; KOEN VAN WEELEN/ANP/GETTY IMAGES; MATTHEW ASHTON/AMA/GETTY IMAGES

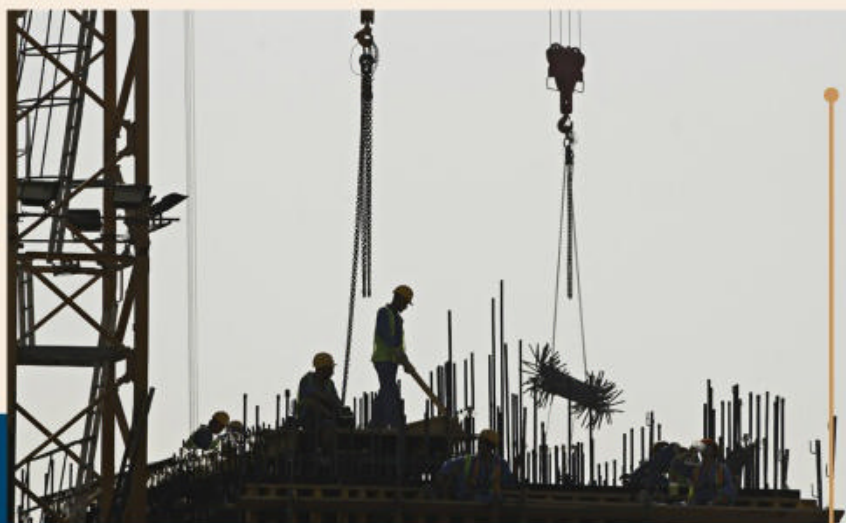


MARCH 18, 2020

The U.S. Department of Justice alleges that representatives from Qatar bribed FIFA officials to win its World Cup bid. Qatar's Supreme Committee denies the charges.

FEB. 23,
2021

A *Guardian* follow-up reports that 6,500 migrant workers in Qatar have died since 2010, many working on Cup construction, despite the Qatari government signing an agreement in '17 to squash labor exploitation.



SEPT. 3, 2022

Organizers brew up a compromise: Beer sales will be allowed inside of specified stadium areas before and after games.



A test event at the new **Lusail Stadium** is reportedly marred by hiccups, including limited AC and water.

SEPT. 9, 2022

2016

2017

2018

2019

2020

2021

2022

2023

DEC. 8, 2020

Officials in Qatar, where homosexuality is a criminal offense, say pride flags will be allowed in stadiums but could be confiscated to prevent conflicts. Two years later, no further assurances have been made about the treatment of LGBTQ fans.



SEPT. 2, 2021

The **USMNT** begins its qualification journey with an underwhelming 0-0 draw at El Salvador ...



Kit-maker Hummel unveils "toned-down" solid-color Danish jerseys (including an all-black "mourning" version) in protest of Qatar's history of human rights violations.

MARCH 30, 2022

... but officially makes it in—securing a return to the tournament after missing 2018—despite a closing 2-0 loss to **Costa Rica**.



APRIL 1, 2022

A two-hour broadcast of the group-stage draw features celebs (Idris Elba), soccer stars (Cafu, Carli Lloyd) and musical performances, plus an animated video revealing Qatar's mascot, **La'eeb**, a flying keffiyeh, or headdress.



SEPT. 28,

2022



BREITLING



The All Star Squad

Giannis Antetokounmpo
Chloe Kim
Trevor Lawrence

BREITLING BOUTIQUE

NEW YORK · CHICAGO · HOUSTON · DETROIT
ORLANDO · LOS ANGELES · WASHINGTON DC
DENVER · SAN DIEGO · MIAMI · PHILADELPHIA
SCOTTSDALE · SAN ANTONIO · SHORT HILLS
LAS VEGAS · SAN JOSE · TAMPA · NASHVILLE



QATAR 2022

GROUP PREDICTIONS

55

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
MARTIN
LAKSMAN

Odds courtesy of SI SPORTSBOOK



With 48 games in 13 days, the **OPENING ROUND** of the World Cup features alluring matchups between continental foes, meetings of rivals with scores to settle and a reigning champion looking to buck a troubling trend in what promises to be a most fascinating fortnight



1

SENEGAL



2

NETHERLANDS

VS.



3

QATAR



4

ECUADOR

On the Rebound

► **GROUP A** features two sides in search of redemption. Historically dominant though never a World Cup champion, the Netherlands failed to qualify for the 2018 tournament for just the second time since 1990. Senegal made it to Russia but was dealt heartbreak in the group stage, being sent home on a tiebreaker that saw Japan advance because it had fewer yellow cards.

Now, though, both sides look dangerous. Senegal went on a dream run to win the Africa Cup of Nations for the first time this year, led by Édouard Mendy in goal. The Chelsea star has allowed just 10 goals in 23 matches for his nation. And forward **Sadio Mané** has hit the ground running at new club Bayern Munich.

The retooled Dutch, now a mix of veterans and younger stars like midfielder Frenkie de Jong, are unbeaten in 15 matches. Manager Louis van Gaal has his side flying

when at its best, as evidenced by a 4-1 thrashing of Belgium in June, although when the Dutch fail to assert their dominance they can falter, as they did in a shock loss to the Czech Republic at last year's Euros.

And as if they needed more help, Senegal and the Netherlands caught a huge break when they were drawn to play the hosts. That should create smooth paths for both to the round of 16.

—Marcus Krum

GAME of the GROUP

NOV. 21

The group's most significant match pits a Dutch side that hasn't lost since June 2021 against a Senegal team with a penchant for grinding out results.

As host, Qatar automatically qualified for its first World Cup. The only rookie in the 2022 field will hope history is on its side as it looks to make its mark beyond the lavish infrastructure built over the last decade. Only one host [South Africa] has failed to get out of the group stage.

HISTORY LESSON



CHAOS COMPONENT

► **Ecuador** is more than just a standard underdog. Pre-World Cup drama struck when Chile challenged La Tri's spot in the tournament, questioning Byron Castillo's

eligibility. [FIFA has twice ruled against Chile on the matter.] The controversy could fuel Ecuador's quest to reach the knockout stage for just the second time.



WORLD CUP
QATAR 2022

ODDS ARE ...

SENEGAL
Group (+350) ► Cup (+9000)

NETHERLANDS
Group (-200) ► Cup (+1200)

QATAR
Group (+1200) ► Cup (+25000)

ECUADOR
Group (+450) ► Cup (+12500)

GROUP B



1

ENGLAND



2

UNITED STATES



3

IRAN



4

WALES

VS.

GAME of the GROUP

NOV. 29
England and Wales have a rich, complex rivalry that has been one-sided: England has won the last six matchups. But they have never met in the World Cup—until now.

The most famous World Cup victory for the U.S. came in 1950, when Joe Gaetjens gave the Americans a 1-0 win over England. In their last World Cup meeting, in 2010, they drew 1-1, prompting the *New York Post* to run the headline: USA WINS 1-1. The sides will meet on Black Friday.

HISTORY LESSON



ODDS ARE ...

ENGLAND
Group (-333) • Cup (+650)
UNITED STATES
Group (+600) • Cup (+10000)
IRAN
Group (+1100) • Cup (+50000)
WALES
Group (+550) • Cup (+15000)

Limping In

► **FOR ALL** of the star power on display, Group B features four teams entering the tournament with serious questions. The U.S. stumbles into Qatar in poor form, with a drubbing at the hands of Japan and an indifferent draw with Saudi Arabia in its final warmups. England was relegated from its group in the UEFA Nations League after a string of defeats. Wales has won one of its last eight matches. Iran fired manager

Dragan Skočić in July despite an excellent qualifying run and brought back Carlos Queiroz for a third Cup, while its players have been involved with anti-government protests.

Yet in international competition, where the games can often be cagey and choppy, talent should be enough to win through in this group. England was at one point the betting favorite to win the whole tournament, and for good reason—the Three Lions have one of the most complete rosters in the world, led by captain **Harry Kane**. And while the U.S. has talented players at big clubs around the globe, the fact remains that the Americans have been held without a goal in six of their last seven games against teams in this field. That lack of firepower could leave the door open for Wales and Iran. —M.K.



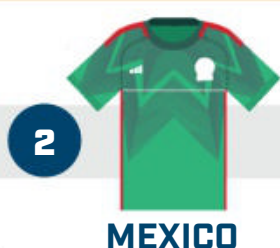
CHAOS COMPONENT

► Gareth Bale's always turned in his best performances while wearing the colors of **Wales**. Never mind his drab form in MLS (two goals in 12 regular-season games

for LAFC), and Wales's run of five matches without a win. Bale's 40 international goals are a reminder of his ability, which should put the rest of the group on alert.

GROUP

▼ Projected group standings ▼



VS.

Leo's Last Hurrah

► **IN HIS** fifth—and likely last—World Cup, **Lionel Messi** will be surrounded by perhaps the most complete side Argentina has ever fielded to support him. La Albiceleste won Copa América in 2021 (their first major title with Messi), haven't lost in 35 games and are among the front-runners to win the whole tournament. Argentina hasn't failed to make it out of the group stage since '02, and it should have few problems rolling on to the knockouts in Qatar.

It helps that Mexico isn't exactly cruising on a run of good form. Coach Tata Martino's seat has grown increasingly hot after some uninspiring performances in the last few years—most notably four straight matches against the U.S. without a win.

While El Tri are certainly missing a game-breaking attacker and have an aging side overall, there's something about this team at the World Cup. When Guillermo Ochoa puts on a Mexico shirt, the 37-year-old looks superhuman in goal. If one attacker makes his name in the group stage—and that always seems to be the case—Mexico will be back where it always is: in the round of 16. —M.K.

GAME of the GROUP

NOV. 26

Messi has helped Argentina beat Mexico twice previously in the World Cup (2006, '10), but El Tri have a history of group-stage giant-slaying (France in '10, Germany in '18).

Tata Martino was born in Argentina and managed that country's national team from 2014 to '16. He now leads a Mexico side that has reached the round of 16 in seven straight World Cups—and lost each time. Get ready to hear about “quinto partido,” the curse of the fifth game.

HISTORY LESSON



CHAOS COMPONENT

► Sometimes all it takes is one world-class player to alter a nation's fortunes. Robert Lewandowski of **Poland** has spent his whole career—with the notable exception of the

2018 Cup—doing nothing but banging in goals for club and country. If the striker is on top of his game—and his form at Barcelona would indicate he is—he could upend the group.



WORLD CUP
QATAR 2022

ODDS ARE ...

ARGENTINA
Group (-225) • Cup (+650)

MEXICO
Group (+400) • Cup (+10000)

POLAND
Group (+350) • Cup (+10000)

SAUDI ARABIA
Group (+3300) • Cup (+50000)



1

FRANCE



2

DENMARK



3

TUNISIA



4

AUSTRALIA

VS.

GROUP D

France comes to Qatar as the reigning champion, which doesn't necessarily bode well. Four of the last five defending champs failed to get out of the group stage [including Les Bleus in 2002], and the World Cup hasn't had a repeat champion since 1962, when Brazil lifted the trophy.

HISTORY LESSON



ODDS ARE...

FRANCE

Group (-275) • Cup (+550)

DENMARK

Group (+260) • Cup (+3000)

TUNISIA

Group (+1400) • Cup (+40000)

AUSTRALIA

Group (+1900) • Cup (+40000)

GAME of the GROUP

NOV. 26

In a lopsided group in which the top two should have little trouble advancing, this game is key: Argentina likely awaits the group's second-place finisher in the round of 16.

Kind of Bleu

► **FOR A** defending champion with a manager, Didier Deschamps, who is on his third World Cup cycle with an incredible pool of talent from which to choose, France is looking mighty unstable. Off-field issues—allegations of sexual harassment against the federation president, an image-rights dispute featuring Kylian Mbappé and claims that Paul Pogba enlisted a witch doctor to hinder Mbappé—have cast a pall

on what looked to be a smooth run in Qatar. Injuries have caused even more concern. Still, Les Bleus are so enormously talented that melting down at the group stage seems inconceivable—even for a side with a history of doing just that.

If France falters, Denmark will be ready to pounce. The Danes are hoping for another big showing at a major tournament after an inspired run to the Euro 2020 semifinals, and they should be bolstered by the emotional return of star midfielder **Christian Eriksen**. The 30-year-old, who collapsed during the Euros after suffering cardiac arrest, returned to the pitch for Denmark in March and scored two minutes into his return. One of the most accomplished Danish players of his generation, Eriksen provides a veteran presence and a bit of creativity even without the burst he used to possess. —M.K.



CHAOS COMPONENT

► From a strictly soccer standpoint, the defending champs are vulnerable: France has lost twice this year to Denmark. But factor in the internal strife plaguing France,

and suddenly Les Bleus seem especially ripe for an early exit. **Tunisia** is led by Wahbi Khazri, who was born in France and would love to send his motherland packing.

GROUP

▼ Projected group standings ▼



SPAIN



GERMANY

VS.



JAPAN



COSTA RICA

Two at the Top

► **BETWEEN THEM**, Spain and Germany have won two European championships and two World Cups since 2008. And since '02, only two major tournaments in which both countries competed did not feature at least one of them in the semifinals.

One of those tournaments was the 2018 World Cup, in which both sides wildly underperformed. Germany and forward **Thomas Müller**, who leads all active players with 10 World Cup goals, crashed out of the group stage, while Spain fell to host Russia in the round of 16. Each now has a new manager: Former Bayern Munich boss Hansi Flick took over for Germany, while Luis Enrique, formerly of Barcelona, is now in charge of Spain. Flick has lost only once in 15 matches since taking over in August 2021, while Enrique took La Roja to the Euro 2020 semifinals, where they lost to eventual champion Italy.

As top-heavy as the group seems, Japan, which is coming off a dominant 2-0 win against the U.S. in a September friendly, is sure to grab some attention. And after finishing fourth in Concacaf qualifying, Costa Rica booked a ticket to its third straight World Cup by defeating New Zealand in the intercontinental playoff. Los Ticos arrive having lost only one match in 11 games in 2022. —Andrew Gastelum

GAME of the GROUP

NOV. 27

Spain enters the most anticipated group-stage game of the Cup with momentum. La Roja, which knocked Germany out in the semis in 2010, pummeled their rivals 6-0 in '20.

The last time Costa Rica was grouped with two European powerhouses, Los Ticos—led by goalkeeper Keylor Navas—beat Italy and drew England in 2014 to win their group. A similar result in their opener against Spain would make things interesting in a hurry.

HISTORY LESSON



CHAOS COMPONENT

► **JAPAN** has made the knockout stage in three of the last five World Cups and conceded just four goals in 10 qualifiers leading to Qatar. The Samurai Blue's

poise and discipline could challenge a slow starter like Spain, which has won only five of 12 group-stage matches at its last four major tournaments.

ODDS ARE ...

SPAIN

Group (-120) ► Cup (+750)

GERMANY

Group (+100) ► Cup (+900)

JAPAN

Group (+1200) ► Cup (+25000)

COSTA RICA

Group (+5500) ► Cup (+50000)



GROUP
F

VS.

Canada's Nov. 27 game against Croatia should have added meaning for goalkeeper Milan Borjan. He was born in Knin, Yugoslavia, now part of Croatia. His Serbian family fled during the Croatian War of Independence in 1995, eventually settling in Ontario.

HISTORY LESSON



GAME of the GROUP

DEC. 1

After each side came so close to World Cup glory in 2018, Belgium's high-octane attack will meet Croatia's gritty midfield engine in the final group-stage match.

Experience and Innocence

► **HAD THE** semifinals played out a little differently four years ago, we'd be looking at a rematch of the 2018 final. As it stands, Group F features the runner-up (Croatia) and the third-place finisher (Belgium) from Russia—and both teams return with their cores largely intact. Belgium will once again rely on 31-year-old playmaker **Kevin De Bruyne** and 29-year-old striker Romelu Lukaku, who have led their country to the top of the FIFA

world rankings (Belgium is currently No. 2)—but never to a trophy.

Croatia is also led by a familiar face: 37-year-old Luka Modrić, who won the Golden Ball as the best player in the 2018 tournament, during which his side won three dramatic knockout-stage games that either went to extra time or penalties.

At the other end of the spectrum is Canada, an exciting young team making just its second World Cup appearance. (The first came in 1986.) The pace and final-third proficiency of Lille forward Jonathan David and Bayern Munich fullback Alphonso Davies will present problems for any opponent.

Morocco's presence has been widely overlooked, but following a coaching change in August, the side should be boosted by the return of its star winger, Chelsea's Hakim Ziyech. —A.G.



ODDS ARE ...

BELGIUM

Group (-200) • Cup (+1100)

CROATIA

Group (+275) • Cup (+4500)

CANADA

Group (+1000) • Cup (+20000)

MOROCCO

Group (+750) • Cup (+20000)

CHAOS COMPONENT

► The **CANADA** hype train is welcoming all passengers. No team in Concacaf qualifying scored more and conceded fewer goals than Canada, which topped the table.

A win or a draw against Belgium or Croatia could throw this group into disarray, and the Canadians are fully capable of stealing a point—or even three—off both teams.



VS.

Playing Favorites

► **WITH AN** electrifying attack and an experienced core, Brazil enters the tournament as the team to beat. It would be stunning for a team led by **Neymar** that has lost only once since the start of 2020 (vs. Argentina in the '21 Copa América final) to not win this group.

The fight for second, which will likely come down to a battle between Switzerland and Serbia, should be far more interesting. The Swiss earned a point in a 1–1 draw with Brazil at the last World Cup and dispatched France in the round of 16 at Euro 2020, topped a qualifying group that featured European champion Italy, and have defeated both Portugal and Spain in UEFA Nations League play this year.

Serbia has not advanced out of the group stage since 1998, when it played as Yugoslavia, and it has scored only two goals in each of

the last three World Cups. But the side likes its chances with a forward line that features Juventus star Dušan Vlahović and Fulham's Aleksandar Mitrović.

Cameroon punched its ticket to Qatar with a 124th-minute winner against Algeria in the second leg of their qualifying playoff in March. It's unlikely the Indomitable Lions will muster up any more drama than that in this tournament. —A.G.



GAME of the GROUP

DEC. 2

Two Swiss players made Albanian nationalist gestures after their goals against Serbia in 2018, flaring tensions. The rematch could get testy.

It'll seem like old times: Brazil, Switzerland and Serbia were all in the same group in Russia in 2018. Brazil and Switzerland drew in the group-stage opener before each defeated Serbia, although the Swiss needed some 90th-minute magic from Xherdan Shaqiri to get through.

HISTORY LESSON



CHAOS COMPONENT

► The team most likely to give Brazil trouble is, well, **BRAZIL**. The Seleção can be their own worst enemy. Then there's the pressure that has been mounting in the 20 years

since Brazil last won the World Cup. If the side struggles in its opener against Serbia, Brazil will be in a cauldron of pressure before its matchup with Switzerland.

ODDS ARE ...

BRAZIL
Group (-250) • Cup (+400)

SWITZERLAND
Group (+450) • Cup (+8000)

SERBIA
Group (+550) • Cup (+10000)

CAMEROON
Group (+1100) • Cup (+25000)





URUGUAY

1



PORTUGAL

2



SOUTH KOREA

3



GHANA

4

GROUP H

VS.

No African team has come closer to making the semifinals than Ghana in 2010. In the 120th minute of the quarters, Uruguay's Luis Suárez earned a red card for intentionally handling a goal-bound header. But Ghana missed the PK and lost the game in a shootout.

HISTORY LESSON



GAME of the GROUP

NOV. 28

Few teams bring more attacking firepower than these two. Uruguay knocked out Portugal in the last 16 in Russia, so there will be a score to settle.

Golden Agers

► **THOUGH 37, Cristiano Ronaldo** has said he has no plans to retire from international soccer after the tournament, where he could become the first men's player to score at five World Cups. (Marta has accomplished that feat for Brazil's women's team.) But Portugal has done nothing but underachieve since Ronaldo's first World Cup in 2006, having failed to make it past the round of 16 in its last three appearances.

Like Portugal, Uruguay is looking at an impending changing of the guard. Its golden generation of strikers—35-year-olds Luis Suárez and Edinson Cavani—is fading. The two have a history of leading Uruguay into the knockout stage, something they have done at the last three World Cups.

After missing out in 2018, Ghana qualified for Qatar by holding on in a 1–1 draw against Nigeria in the African playoffs to earn the spot on away goals. However, Ghana has not won in four matches this year against teams in the field. And South Korea will go only as far as Son Heung-min can take it—which could be pretty far. The Tottenham star, who scored in the last two World Cups, tied for the lead in the Premier League with 23 goals last season. —A.G.



ODDS ARE ...

URUGUAY

Group (+210) • Cup (+4500)

PORTUGAL

Group (-163) • Cup (+1200)

SOUTH KOREA

Group (+900) • Cup (+25000)

GHANA

Group (+1000) • Cup (+25000)

CHAOS COMPLETES

► Portugal has a knack for letting its chances to advance come down to the final day of the group stage. If Ronaldo & Co. leave it late again this year, they will find in their finale a

formidable foe with a history of dashing a favorite's Cup hopes: **SOUTH KOREA**, which four years ago ended Germany's title defense in the group stage with a 2–0 victory.



QATAR 2022

A
1 SENEGAL
2 NETHERLANDS
3 QATAR
4 ECUADOR

B
1 ENGLAND
2 UNITED STATES
3 IRAN
4 WALES

C
1 ARGENTINA
2 MEXICO
3 POLAND
4 SAUDI ARABIA

D
1 FRANCE
2 DENMARK
3 TUNISIA
4 AUSTRALIA

E
1 SPAIN
2 GERMANY
3 JAPAN
4 COSTA RICA

F
1 BELGIUM
2 CROATIA
3 CANADA
4 MOROCCO

G
1 BRAZIL
2 SWITZERLAND
3 SERBIA
4 CAMEROON

H
1 URUGUAY
2 PORTUGAL
3 SOUTH KOREA
4 GHANA

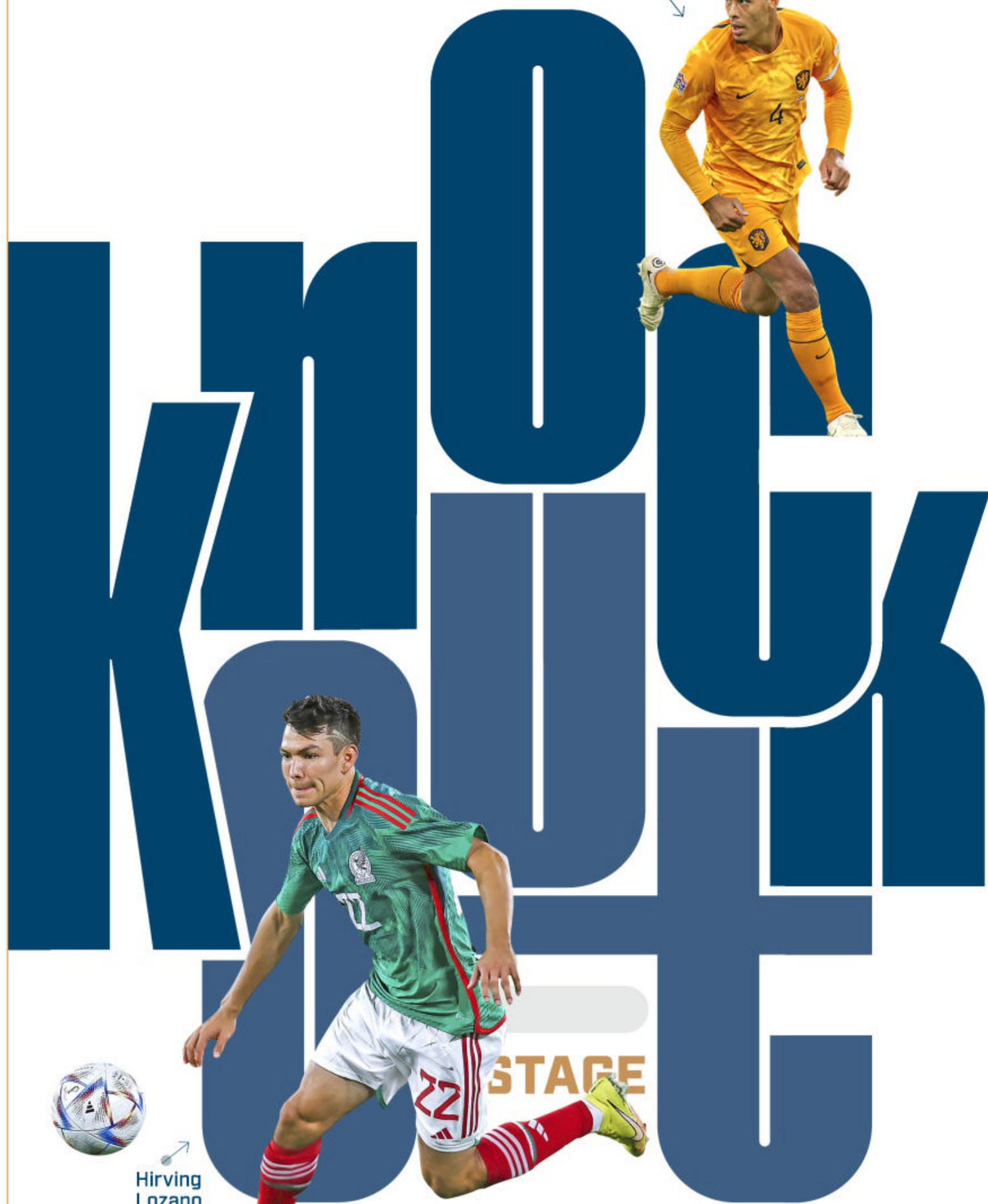
64

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
DECEMBER 2022
WORLD CUP PREVIEW

Virgil van Dijk
Netherlands



Hirving
Lozano
Mexico



WHOSE CORONATION AWAITS in Qatar? There are plenty of viable contenders, but there's reason to question them all. Injury and instability threaten to give the reigning champ, France, a case of the bleus. England is hobbled and out of form. Germany and Spain are transitioning. Belgium's golden generation is losing its luster.

Then there's Brazil. For most nations, a multidecade gap between men's World Cup titles is no tragedy. Only eight teams have ever



won it all, period. But the five-time champion is not most futebol-ing nations. Europeans have won four World Cups since Brazil last captured the trophy, in 2002, but the current squad was built to end that continental dominance, and it was utterly ruthless in South America's qualifying cauldron, going 14-0-3 while outscoring foes 40-5. There's balance here through a blend of panache [from the electric Neymar and

Vinícius Júnior] and solidity [steely midfielders Casemiro and Fabinho, along with steady goalkeeper Alisson], and it should be enough to send departing manager Tite out on a high. There is perhaps additional motivation on the world stage, after the recent racial abuse of players, like Vinícius, for simply expressing themselves by dancing after scoring—but Brazil needs no extra boost with this trophy at stake. □



QATAR 2022

BY
BRIAN STRAUS

ILLUSTRATION BY
THE SPORTING PRESS

CUP RUNNETH OVER

WITH THE NEXT MEN'S WORLD CUP SET TO
EXPAND TO 48 TEAMS, ENJOY THIS ONE LAST
TOURNAMENT OF STRUCTURAL PERFECTION

THERE'S A DECENT chance that when the men's World Cup makes its way to North America in 2026, with its field expanded from 32 to 48 teams, locals will be introduced to a bit of suddenly relevant old soccer lore. The famed "Disgrace of Gijón" remains a 90-minute cautionary tale of how significantly tournament scheduling and structure can impact results.

Gijón is a coastal city in northwest Spain, and the disgrace was perpetrated there during the 1982 World Cup. That 24-team tournament—where the first round started with six groups of four—allowed only two African entrants, and one of them, Algeria, stunned West Germany, 2–1, in the opener. No African nation had ever advanced at a World Cup, but by the time the group stage was concluding, Algeria remained in the hunt with the West Germans and Austria for one of the group's prized two spots in the second round.

The problem was that Algeria had already finished its group-stage schedule when the other two teams kicked off their final game, in Gijón, and the neighbors knew what was required to go through at Algeria's expense. Horst Hrubesch's 10th-minute goal lifted West Germany to a 1–0 lead, and that was it. The rest of the game played out like that farcical scene in *The Simpsons*.

Cut to Kent Brockman: "Halfback passes to the center, back to the wing, back to the center. Center holds it, holds it, *holds* it . . ."

Austria's actual commentator, Robert Seeger, famously told viewers to turn off their TVs.

All three nations finished group play with two wins and a loss, but Germany and Austria advanced on goal differential. FIFA rejected Algeria's protest—no rules had been broken. But reforms followed that persist to this day, reducing the likelihood of conspiracy or chicanery in





soccer tournaments and leagues across the world. Most notably, group-stage (or regular-season) finales would kick off simultaneously.

But that may not persist into 2026, as the influx of teams will require a format shake-up. For FIFA, the definition of fairness has evolved.

There were the two African sides at the 1982 World Cup, and just one four years earlier. And Asia, the planet's most populous continent, somehow received only one ticket to Spain. The World Cup was barely that, and, as soccer went global, access had to evolve.

Sixteen years after Gijón, FIFA finally seemed to find the happiest medium. France 1998 featured 32 teams—17 from outside Europe—and a generally agreeable balance between inclusion and quality. Nobody was blown out. Everybody belonged. The tournament format itself was square, symmetrical and satisfying: eight groups

↑ **HAVING A BALL**

This year's tournament will be the final men's event with 32 teams. In 2026, 16 more nations will have their names drawn into groups.

of four teams each, with the top two finishers in each advancing to the knockouts. There were no wild cards or third-place reprieves, and every contender had the same, seven-game path to the title. And yes, group-stage finales were played at the same time. After decades of tinkering, it felt like FIFA had found its ideal format. It remained largely unchanged for the next six World Cups.

But growth is inevitable—or at least the desire for it is. The NFL, MLB, NBA, MLS, NWSL and Mexico's Liga MX have all increased their playoff fields in recent seasons. The size of the College Football Playoff is going to triple. Overseas, men's continental championships in Europe, Africa and Asia all now feature 24 national teams, while UEFA's club competition overhaul includes a Champions League enlarged from 32 to 36 teams starting in 2024, as well as the Europa Conference League, a lower-tier tournament created last year. More participants

and more product mean more investment, sponsorship and TV revenue.

"We are in the 21st century, and we have to shape the World Cup of the 21st century," FIFA president Gianni Infantino said in early 2017. "The football fever that you have in a country that qualifies for the World Cup is the biggest promotional tool for football that you can have."

The FIFA Council vote that preceded Infantino's remarks was unanimous. When the planet's biggest sporting event balloons to 48 countries in 2026, a significant majority of the additional berths will be allocated outside of Europe. There were a few pockets of resistance among football's elite, but they were swiftly swept aside.

"I think the number was pretty comfortable," says Concacaf president and FIFA vice president Victor Montagliani, a Canadian businessman. "Some of the pushback was, you always have the traditionalists who think it should stay where it was. I'm sure some [FIFA] members think it should've stayed at 16 until the end of time. That's not our reality."

"A lot of members have been investing in their development programs, and we thought this was a balance that still kept the exclusivity of a World Cup but also giving people that have been investing and members that hope. That's one of the things we always have to provide."

As alarming as the 50% increase seems, Montagliani's use of "exclusivity" still isn't entirely off base. FIFA has 211 members—that's more than the United Nations—so less than 23% of the world's national teams will make the enlarged World Cup. That's a far lower percentage than the playoff qualification rates of any of the major North American leagues, and it's stingier than any of the six continental championships, which are a national team's secondary target. (The Concacaf Gold Cup is the most exclusive, at 39%.)

Expansion will have an impact on regional qualifying tournaments, which constitute a major portion of the international soccer calendar. South America, for example, has traditionally staged a 10-team double round robin that sends four countries directly to the World Cup (while a fifth typically enters through a playoff).

"As we MOVE FORWARD TO 2030,"
Montagliani says, **"the pool of teams that can beat each other on any given day is going to get bigger and bigger."**

That marathon would be pointless, however, with the six automatic bids and a playoff place available for 2026. It doesn't make much sense to schedule 90 matches to eliminate three teams. The same is true in Concacaf, where we've likely seen the last of the epic home-and-home qualifiers between the U.S. and Mexico. After automatic qualification in '26—another upside of hosting—the rivals will probably be seeded in separate groups going forward as the region's guaranteed World Cup allocation doubles to six.

The coming overhaul represents a measurable loss of tradition, excitement, jeopardy and revenue. (Individual countries, not FIFA, own the rights to their qualifiers.) Montagliani argues that those deficits will be offset by the inevitable rise of nations that now feel they have a shot at qualification. An attempt to trigger that improvement is already underway in Concacaf.



QATAR 2022

The new Nations League competition, which kicked off in 2019, offers smaller countries a platform to develop. The number of international matches within the region has increased roughly threefold over the past four years, Montagliani says.

"As we move forward beyond 2030," he argues, "you're going to see an increase in competitiveness in terms of a lot of our countries, where the pool of teams that can beat each other on any given day is going to get bigger and bigger."

But what about that singular, magical month that comes just once every four years? Its current structural perfection is, to some extent, being sacrificed upon Infantino's altar of the "hope."

There is no square, symmetrical or satisfying way to stage a 48-team tournament. FIFA's original 80-game group-stage plan—16 groups, three teams each—sets up 16 potential Disgrace of Gijón scenarios, where one team will be finished and the remaining two will know what's required to advance. Infantino mentioned using penalty kicks during the group stage, or even FIFA's monthly ranking, as a potential extra tiebreaker that could limit the chance of collusion. Both are gimmicks.

What about 12 groups of four? That would create 24 extra group-stage games and, assuming the new round of 32 is maintained, reintroduce the unwieldy third-place wild cards. The four semifinalists then would be forced to play an unprecedented eight games in 32 to 35 days. For now, the three-team-groups setup seems likely, despite its inherent flaws. There's no ideal solution, because FIFA has decided to abandon the ideal format. Infantino promised more, and now he has to manage the crowd. Montagliani says that FIFA, which has had the pandemic and the Qatar World Cup to deal with, will start to dig into the issue next year.

"I think it's a valid concern. Formats are always a concern," Montagliani says. "If FIFA feels that it's in the best interest of the tournament to review this format, I think it's our fiduciary duty to do it, keeping in mind the same principles have to be in place: It's got to be good for the tournament. It's got to be done with the proper sort of dialogue with the stakeholders, and it ensures the tournament stays within the framework—35 or so days."

So enjoy the final "perfect" World Cup, and keep in mind that it could have been so much worse. Infantino's effort to demolish the global football calendar and stage a men's World Cup every two years died on the vine this spring. □

HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

INSPIRATION FOR EVERYONE ON YOUR LIST

VERSACE EROS PARFUM JUMBO SPRAY

The New **Eros Parfum Jumbo Spray** is the ultimate gift for the Versace fragrance lover in your life. Evoking Eros, the God of love, this vibrant scent fuses cool citrus and mystic woody notes, creating a bold, masculine fragrance that fills the world with its energy.

\$190 (200ml) | [Macys.com](https://www.macys.com)



SKECHERS PICKLEBALL FOOTWEAR

Skechers brings its signature comfort and innovation to pickleball with **Skechers Viper Court™** footwear. Worn by pros and perfect for casual players as well, this premiere style provides responsive performance in a breathable, lightweight design. The enhanced grip and stability of the Goodyear® rubber outsole paired with a shock-absorbing Arch Fit® insole delivers incredible support, match after match.

[Skechers.com](https://www.skechers.com)



SEIKO PROSPEX U.S. SPECIAL EDITIONS

Inspired by those dedicated to underwater cave exploration, these **U.S. Special Edition** Seiko diver's watches feature distinct patterned dials evoking the formations of undersea caves and the changing color tones viewed by divers as their safety lights illuminate these deep-water caverns. As versatile as they are durable, the bold and rugged cases and bracelets are crafted with well-defined and sophisticated lines perfect for less hazardous everyday adventures.

\$1,500 | [SeikoLuxe.com](https://www.seikoluxe.com)



YETI ROADIE® WHEELED COOLER

Easy enough for long treks, tall enough for chilled wine, big enough for an all-day tailgate. The **Roadie 48® Wheeled Cooler** is built for navigating tailgate crowds and taking lunches to go, and it has the cold-holding power you expect from YETI®. It's also made to last for generations – from the handle to its durable wheels, this thing is virtually indestructible.

\$450 | [Yeti.com](https://www.yeti.com)





WORLD CUP THE (NOT ALWAYS)

BY
BEN LYTTLETON

PHOTOGRAPH BY
SHAUN BOTTERILL/GETTY IMAGES



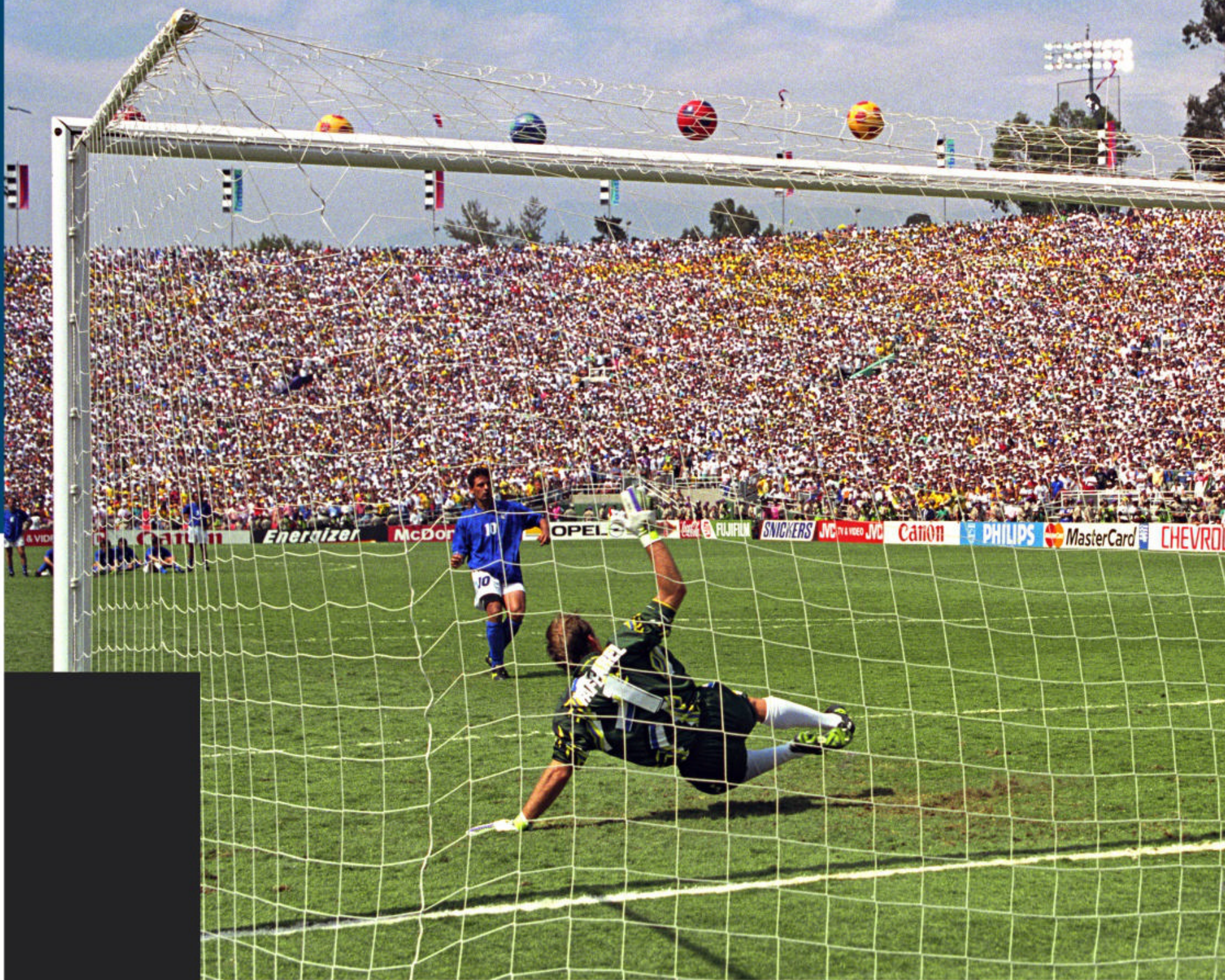
SWEET SCIENCE OF

Penalty Kicks

Think the World Cup's match-deciding shootouts come down to dumb luck?

Think again. In Qatar, there will be **MENTAL GAMES** aplenty.

And the data says teams would be foolish to not be prepared



THE PENALTY KICK is soccer in its purest form: a ball, a goal, a kicker and a goalkeeper. You'd think that any player talented enough to represent their national team would be able to score from 12 yards. And yet, competing in a World Cup penalty shootout is as emotionally fraught a task an athlete can be asked to perform.

The shootout's unique place in sporting drama dates back to its first instance in the tournament, the 1982 semifinal between France and West Germany (it is used to settle matches from the knockout round of 16 on). At the end of a rugged 90 minutes—plus 30 more of extra time—the goalkeepers, inexperienced in shootouts, seemed rooted to the goal line, often diving after the ball had passed them. The first player to miss in the five-round contest, German midfielder Uli Stielike, reacted by curling into a ball on the ground and then bursting into tears as he made



WORLD CUP JULY 17, 1994 • PASADENA, CALIF.

Italy vs. Brazil



The owner of a career 88% success rate, **Roberto Baggio** was expected to bury his penalty kick in this World Cup final and

prolong the shootout. But, as star players are prone to do, he missed. He soared it over the crossbar, and Brazil lifted the trophy.

his way back to the center circle. For the millions watching around the world, the implication was clear: Missing a penalty was a terrible fate, capable of reducing powerful professional athletes into blubbing, infantile wrecks. Penalties were scary—and we, the audience, were hooked.

No one was immune to missing. In 1994, Italy's Roberto Baggio was the world's best player, whose goals in the quarterfinals and semifinals had earned his team a place in the final against Brazil. After a goalless draw, in the sweltering heat of the Rose Bowl, Baggio stepped up to take his kick for Italy in the first World Cup final shootout. Brazil led the PKs 3–2; Baggio needed a goal to avoid defeat. His penalty record was impressive: He ended his career with a success rate of 88%, well above the 78% average. “We were all feeling the same before the penalties,” he remembers. “We could

see the fear in each other's eyes.” Baggio fired his penalty over the crossbar, and Italy lost.

Baggio is not alone in this fate. The list of players to miss World Cup shootout penalties includes the game's greats: Sócrates, Michel Platini, Andriy Shevchenko and Diego Maradona among them. And alongside these world-class players, you can include English players—lots of them.

England, you see, has the worst record of any men's national team in shootouts. It lost seven of its first eight in the World Cup or European Championships, each one bringing a fresh national trauma. As an English football fan, I watched as coach Roy Hodgson shrugged off his team's 2012 Euros elimination to Italy via shootout (this was loss No. 7) by describing it as a game of chance and saying that you can never prepare. He was repeating what all losing England coaches had said before. I thought he was wrong.

TWO YEARS EARLIER, I had been four minutes away from helping to determine the outcome of a World Cup final. It was 2010, and I was part of a team, along with *Soccernomics* authors Simon Kuper and Stefan Szymanski, and London School of Economics professor Ignacio Palacios-Huerta, that put together a dossier on penalty kicks for the Netherlands ahead of the final against Spain in South Africa.

This was before the data revolution in soccer, and there was no doubt that the information provided—containing penalty preferences and kicking trends for the likes of Fernando Torres and David Villa—would have given the Netherlands an edge if the game went to a shootout. The Dutch seemed so confident, in fact, that they



appeared to spend most of the match playing for penalties. Four minutes from the end of extra time, though, Andrés Iniesta scored Spain's winning goal. We will never know whether Villa would have kicked to the goalkeeper's left, as the report predicted.

And so, after Hodgson's depressing verdict, I began investigating whether there were ways to improve a team's chances in a penalty shootout, spending the next two years traveling the world seeking to unravel the mystery of the perfect penalty kick. I spoke to players who had scored penalties and missed penalties; to a player from every team that had beaten England on penalties. I spoke to goalkeepers and coaches, doctors and psychologists. I even spoke to golfers, tennis players, rugby kickers and gridiron coaches, all of whom practice specifically for high-pressure moments.

The outcome of this investigation was published in my book *Twelve Yards: The Art and Psychology of the Perfect Penalty*. I came away with a few key learnings. First, everyone loves a penalty shootout (except the players who lose them) and also that, yes, there are ways to boost your chances of

winning one. The penalty kick is a trainable skill that can be improved (proving a succession of English coaches wrong), and, when it comes to penalties, ability takes a back seat to psychology.

Let's go back to Baggio's missed penalty from 1994. Baggio's shot backs up two of the most interesting findings from the research of Norwegian sport psychologist Dr. Geir Jordet. One, that players of "high status" (those who have won individual awards), who face increased pressure due to higher expectations, have lower penalty conversion rates; and two, that penalty kicks to avoid defeat in a World Cup shootout are much harder to score, with a conversion rate of 62%, as opposed to 92% when kicking to win the shootout. "This shows how big the differences are when



QATAR 2022

you put psychology into the mix,” says Jordet. “It basically shows the power of thinking about positive, rather than negative, consequences.”

This might have been the reason for one of England’s most famous shootout disasters, in the 2006 World Cup against Portugal. Even after Wayne Rooney was sent off early in the second half, Portugal was still happy to play for PKs. Sure enough, England had three out of four penalties saved and lost the shootout 3–1.

“These big players miss, and that’s not because they are the wrong players to take penalties,”

➔ WORLD CUP JUNE 22, 2002 • GWANGJU, SOUTH KOREA

S. Korea vs. Spain



South Korea coach Guus Hiddink’s play to have his players practice the walk to the penalty spot in the empty stadium to prepare for the walk in

the actual match worked in the quarters against Spain. All five of his players converted, and **Lee Woon-Jae** made the match-winning save.

says Ricardo Soares Pereira, who was Portugal’s goalkeeper in that game and now works with youth goalkeepers in the national setup. “These players are at the best clubs in the world, but in these big games, it becomes a mental thing. They need to do some mental work.”

The question is, what does this mental work look like? Didier Deschamps, coach of 2018 world champion France, says he never has his players practice penalties, because he trusts them to get the job done. That didn’t look so smart at Euro 2020, when his star player, Kylian Mbappé, missed his kick to avoid defeat against Switzerland. Other coaches remain unconvinced that you can replicate the pressure of a World Cup shootout. But try telling Novak Djokovic not to practice his second

serve in training because it’s not the same as a match, or asking Scottie Scheffler to pack away his putter, as there’s no pressure in practice.

The key to training players for the shootout is the word *purpose*. What does purposeful practice look like? In the case of former South Korea coach Guus Hiddink, it involved having his players walk from one penalty spot to the other in an empty stadium on the day before their 2002 World Cup quarterfinal against Spain. Hiddink was training his players to be ready for the (shorter, but more tense) walk from center to the spot in the match. It went to penalties, and South Korea won 5–3.

Before the 2018 World Cup, England also put purpose into its practice. The shootout training began years before the tournament (to normalize the process) and was so advanced that by the time the World Cup began, each player knew whether he would be taking a penalty, what number in the order his penalty would be and, crucially, where he would be directing his penalty. In pressure situations, our decision-making faculties falter, so the coaches wanted decisions made in advance.

England also focused heavily on its players’ body language. When midfielder Jordan Henderson was the first to miss a penalty in the inevitable shootout in the round of 16 against Colombia, he did not physically crumble like Stielike. Instead, he walked back to his teammates with his head held high. England goalkeeper Jordan Pickford was the first player to hand the ball to his own team’s penalty taker, giving him a friendly start to his pre-kick routine. England went on to win that shootout and break a World Cup penalty hex that had lasted 28 years.

Its coach, Gareth Southgate, knew that history better than most. His penalty miss in the 1996 European Championship semifinal against Germany had started the national trauma in the first place, and he was determined to avoid anyone being as unprepared as he was then.

And yes, even preparing for a shootout does not guarantee success. After England lost the Euro 2020 final to Italy on penalties, Southgate did *not* blame the defeat on misfortune, but took responsibility. “I chose the guys to take the kicks . . . and nobody is on their own,” he said.

So, what can we expect at the 2022 World Cup? One, a reminder from the more progressive coaches that penalties are a trainable skill. And two, an increasing focus on psychology—for that, in most cases, watch the goalkeeper.

Examples of keepers working opponents’ minds are plentiful: There’s Argentina’s trash-talking



WORLD CUP JULY 3, 2018 • MOSCOW, RUSSIA

England vs. Colombia



England's round-of-16 win over Colombia was years in the making. Coach Gareth Southgate—who famously missed

a PK in the 1996 Euros—prepared meticulously, and **Eric Dier** nailed the decisive shot to give his country its first Cup shootout win.

Emiliano Martínez, who told Colombian kicker Yerry Mina that he knew exactly where he was going to kick it—and then made the save—on the way to winning the 2021 Copa América. There's Brest's Gautier Larsonneur, of France, who stood off to the right of his goal to psyche out Neymar in a 2021 Ligue 1 match, with the Brazilian star missing the target entirely. There's Atlético Mineiro's Everson, from Brazil, who takes time placing a prayer necklace in the goal before every penalty. And then, with a direct link to the 2022 World Cup, there is Andrew Redmayne.

With Australia and Peru locked in a scoreless draw to determine which nation would land the final spot in Qatar, Redmayne was subbed in to play goal in the final minutes of extra time. Redmayne is not a penalty expert, but that didn't matter, because his mere presence as a substitute appeared to sow doubt in the mind of the takers. Redmayne elaborately and unpredictably danced across his goal line before every penalty. He threw his counterpart's water bottle, which contained information on the Australian kickers' preferences, into the stands. And with Peru facing a make-or-go-home final kick, he took so long to get into position that Alex Valera had

to wait an absurd 18 seconds after spotting the ball to take his penalty, which Redmayne saved, winning the match for Australia. Jordet's research shows that goalkeeper distraction techniques are linked with 10% fewer penalty conversions, and long waits can reduce conversion by 20%.

"Football today is a psychological game," Jordet explains. "Mind games have evolved: On one hand, they're more intense and brutal, on the other, they are more subtle and complex. [In the case of Australia,] Redmayne deliberately seized control over this shootout."

These mind games are not just limited to goalkeepers. We might see other players scuffling up a penalty spot, turning their backs on the keeper to avoid their antics and moving to the front of the center circle to show support for the kicker.

Purposeful practice and a focus on psychology do not guarantee success in the shootout, but they will improve a team's chances. The other research finding that could haunt some teams is that losing shootouts is a contagious habit—and so is winning them. A player's likelihood of converting a penalty if their team won its last shootout rises from 76% to 83% (and 89% if the team won its last two shootouts). If the team lost, it drops to 72% (and 57% if two in a row). That's bad news for Ghana, which has lost its last five shootouts, and for Spain, which has been eliminated from its last two tournaments on spot kicks. It's better news for Croatia, which won successive shootouts in 2018, and Germany, which is on a run of six straight wins, including that maiden 1982 success.

Where this leaves the U.S. men's national team is anyone's guess. In the last 17 years, it has taken

part in only one shootout, losing 3–2 in a barely significant 2015 Concacaf Gold Cup third-place match against Panama. In fact, no team has played more World Cup matches without facing a shootout than the USMNT. There's a real need for worry, though, only if coach Gregg Berhalter says you cannot prepare for the chance of a shootout.

In 2014, Netherlands coach Louis van Gaal could not wait to claim credit for his club's World Cup quarterfinal shootout victory. He had subbed on goalkeeper Tim Krul for the penalties, just like Australia would do eight years later. van Gaal's tactic psyched out Costa Rica and resulted in a rare Dutch shootout success. A few days later, his team lost to Argentina on penalties. van Gaal's reaction was priceless—if not misinformed.

“Ach, the penalty shootout, it's just a lottery.” □

➤ WORLD CUP QUALIFIER JUNE 13, 2022 • AL RAYYAN, QATAR

Australia vs. Peru



Brought on specifically for the shootout, Socceroos goalkeeper **Andrew Redmayne** (with hands on head) helped psych out

Peru with antics including dancing along the goal line and tossing the Peruvian keeper's water bottle into the stands.

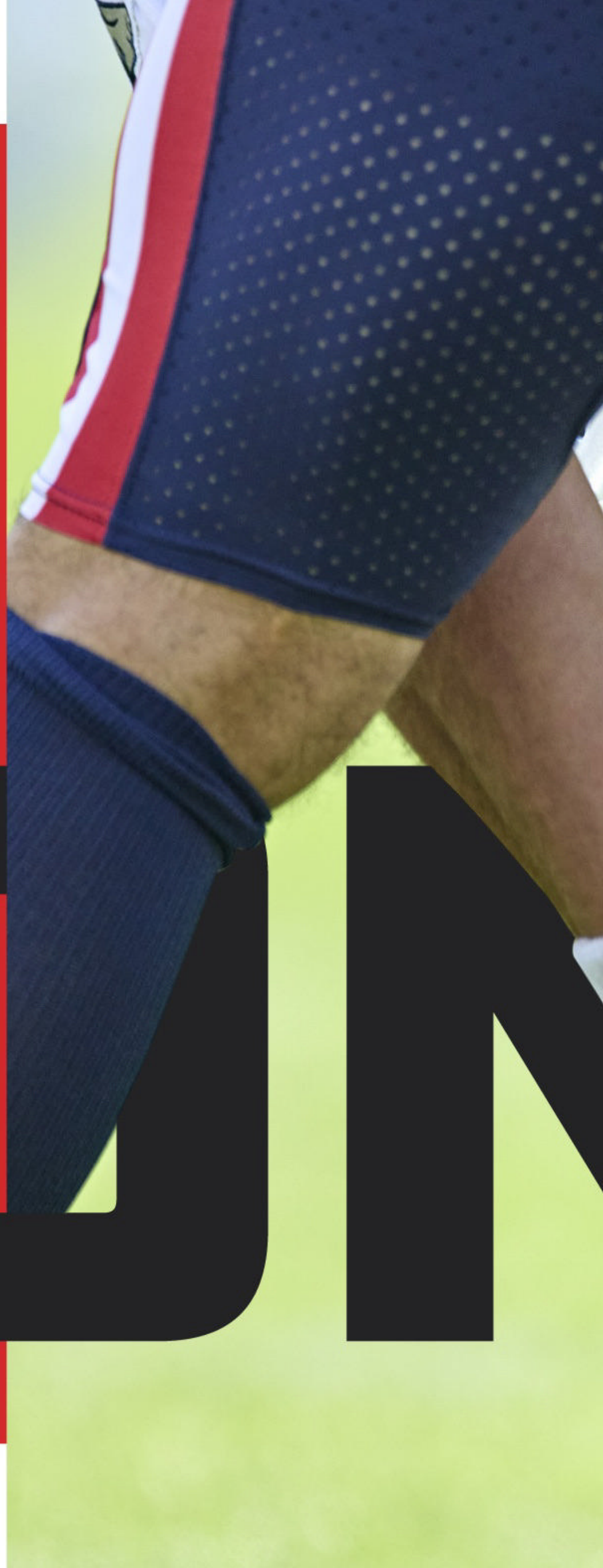


FOLDED OVER, FIRING
SPIRALS THROUGH
THEIR LEGS, THEY'RE
AS OVERLOOKED AS
THEY ARE ESSENTIAL.
INSIDE THE
EVOLUTION, POLITICS
AND ECONOMICS
OF THE SPECIALEST
SPECIALISTS

BY ALEX PREWITT

PHOTOGRAPH BY
DAVID E. KLUTHO

THE UPSIDE DOWN WORLD OF





SNAPPERS



Early in the fourth quarter of their season opener, the Bengals found themselves confronted by a distinct football catastrophe. The play that caused it was fairly unremarkable, so much so that the CBS broadcast didn't note the impact until about an hour later. But its consequences would cost Cincinnati dearly and shape the early course of its AFC title defense.

Bengals punter Kevin Huber kicked away to Pittsburgh's Gunner Olszewski, who shrugged aside the flailing tackle attempt of Clark Harris and bounced outside. Olszewski's return covered 20 yards while Harris writhed on the turf with what was later revealed to be a torn right biceps. The Bengals' long snapper was hurt—what unfolded was a nightmare.

After a frantic comeback, Cincinnati was an extra point away from victory. Mitchell Wilcox, its No. 2 tight end, served as Harris's emergency fill-in. The first snap of his NFL career was noticeably slow, giving a Steelers rusher time to get his fingers on the kick. Wilcox got another chance in overtime, but this time his snap flew high; Huber was unable to turn the laces, and the ultra-reliable Evan McPherson's 29-yard field goal attempt knuckled far wide left. The Steelers later won on a last-second kick of their own.

For fellow NFL snappers, such as the Patriots' eighth-year veteran Joe Cardona, Harris's injury brought up mixed emotions. It stunk to see a member of their 32-man community sidelined, especially someone Cardona calls "one of the best in the league, hands-down." Yet Cardona couldn't help but feel a bit of satisfaction at how things turned out, too. "We're in a moment where we're seeing the value and importance of the position," Cardona says. "I think what happened in Cincinnati would be the best example of that."

In addition to serving as the folded-over starting post for New England's punts, field goals and PAT attempts, Cardona has long fought to bring snappers more shine. Significant gains were made in 2020, when he and others made enough noise behind the scenes to secure inclusion of a long-snapper spot in Pro Bowl balloting and All-Pro voting for the first time. But clearly, work remains: The *Madden* franchise



THE LONG GAME

The path for NFL snappers like Cardona (left) was paved by DeOssie (No. 99) in the 1980s and '90s.

doesn't even give long snapping its own separate position category. "It's pretty insulting," says Cardona, who is listed as a tight end in *Madden 23*—at a paltry 25-overall rating, no less. (Then again, he adds, "I don't play their game, but I do get a nice licensing check. So who's really winning there?")

An argument can be made that every long snapper in the league has already won; on average they get paid to deliver snaps for eight kicks per game and

then kick back for the rest. “Obviously, it’s the best job in the NFL,” the Seahawks’ Carson Tinker says.

Spiral down the rabbit hole of the most specialized role in professional sports, though, and surprising depth is revealed, from a booming cottage industry of snapping-specific coaches cranking out rankings of kids as young as middle school, to bubbling calls for solidarity in pursuit of higher salaries at the NFL level. “It’s a niche, for sure,” Cardona says. “But if we’re not fighting to be recognized as a position, what’s the point?”

Even the monotonous, solitary nature of the act of snapping itself belies the true complexity (and pressure!) of their overall duties. “It’s combining a quarterback’s degree of accuracy with the strength of a linebacker and the technique of an offensive lineman,” Cardona says.

Or as then Eagles snapper Pat Beach put it to the *Philadelphia Daily News* three decades earlier, in October 1992, “It looks easy, but believe me, this is definitely not a snap.”

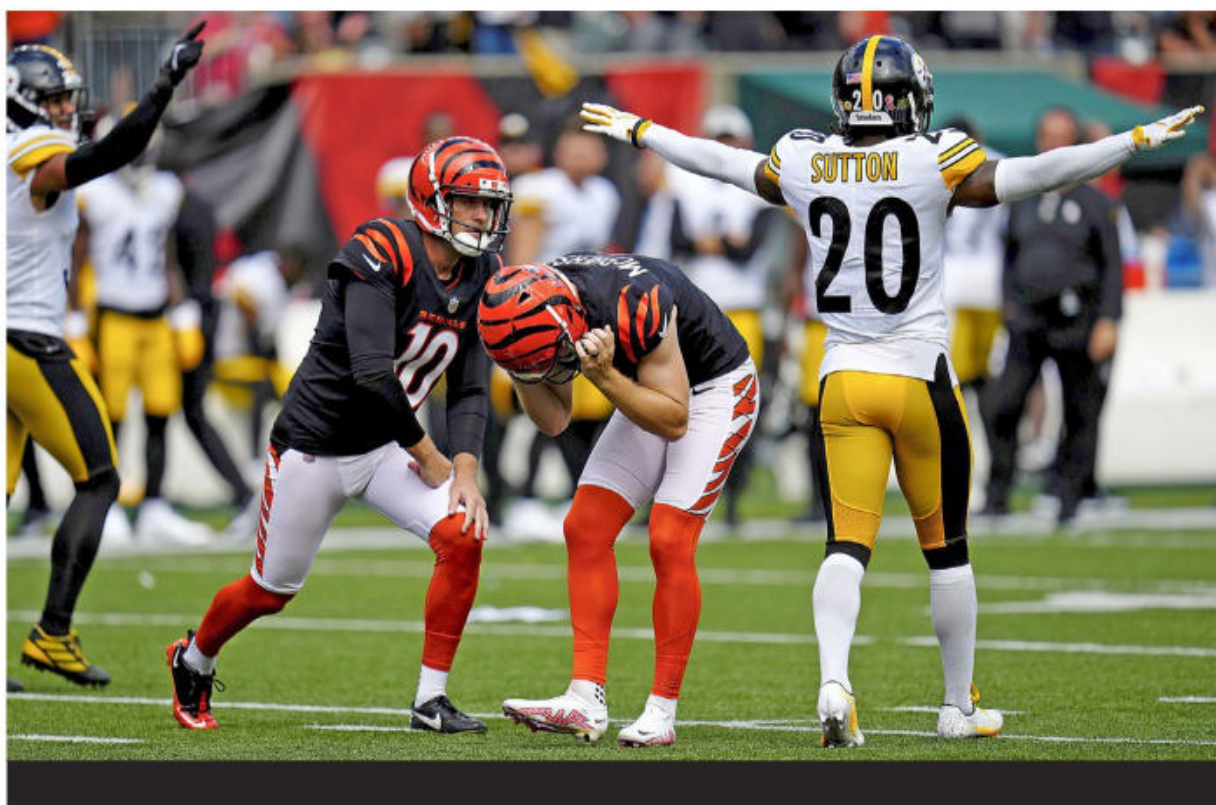
IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to separate long snappers from football, if only because every legal instance of a foot striking a ball in the sport (aside from on kickoffs) starts with a long snap. “Think about a famous kick,” says agent Kevin Gold, whose career client list features more than two dozen NFL snappers. “The ball didn’t just appear there.”

However, decades passed before the position earned the dignity of distinct terminology; up through the 1970s, the only place to find “long snapper” in a newspaper’s sports section was in a fishing tournament recap (the same goes for the previously interchangeable term “deep snapper”). Their role was simply an extra chore given to a backup tight end, linebacker or lineman with a suitable spiral, meaningful enough to practice every so often yet wholly unworthy of occupying a roster spot.

Still, there have always been a few fanatics. Patriots coach Bill Belichick memorably preached about the

position for 10 uninterrupted minutes during a media availability last season—and seemed to actually enjoy himself in the process. A second-generation coaching descendent of George Allen (who is credited with rostering the first dedicated long snapper, Washington’s George Burman in 1971), Belichick opened his filibuster by tracing modern snapping to another figure: “The key guy,” Belichick said, “was DeOssie.”

Steve DeOssie never predicted that he would shape long-snapping history when the Cowboys drafted



SNAP JUDGMENT

An emergency fill-in, Wilcox (far right) misfired twice, resulting in an agonizing opener loss for McPherson (above) and the Bengals.

him as a combo linebacker-snapper in 1984. “I got tricked my rookie year,” he says. “They asked if I could snap for the punt and have blocking assignments. I assumed that’s what they did in the NFL, so I said sure. Then within two days I realized that it wasn’t the norm. It wasn’t just snap, move right or left, and get a gap. They were giving the snapper actual man-on-man responsibility.”

The result was a revolutionary spread punt coverage scheme that dispatched two gunners out wide, trusting in the nearly 250-pound DeOssie’s blocking acumen. “There was nothing they could show us that would make us bring the gunners in,” DeOssie says. “That was the biggest advantage.”

Soon the whole league had undergone a similar

mindset shift: By 1997, two years after the last of DeOssie's 12 transformative NFL seasons, more than half of clubs were regularly designating a long snapper on their weekly special-teams depth charts. "Everybody thinks they can do it, because they think that all you gotta do is bend over and get the ball back to the holder," Gold says. "But there's a hell of a lot more involved, as James Harrison will tell you."

FOURTEEN YEARS LATER, the memory of his single career snap is fresh in James Harrison's mind. Then a dominating outside linebacker for the Steelers who captured Defensive Player of the Year honors in 2008, Harrison was standing on the sidelines during a game against the Giants that October when long snapper Greg Warren tore his right ACL.

"S---, I thought it was great till I looked back and saw it was out the back of the end zone."

Punter Mitch Berger never had a chance to snag Harrison's missile, which sailed over his head and through the end zone, resulting in a pivotal safety in a Steelers loss. And though Harrison more than

punts, I don't worry about rotations, because you've got more time and it's harder to manipulate at 15 yards versus eight. I just try to put it at his belt buckle, where he can catch it and kick it in two seconds or less."

There's also the work beyond snapping, like warding off 300-pound opponents—no small undertaking for a generation of snappers unfamiliar with NFL-style protections. Shield formations, which put less protection responsibility on snappers, are far more prevalent in college. "That's the biggest learning curve," Tinker says. "The snapper doesn't have to block in college."

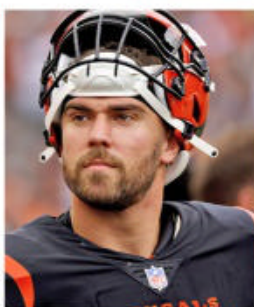
Every so often, the snapper is even called upon for more prestigious work. "Making a tackle is fantastic," says the Panthers' J.J. Jansen, who has recorded 20 (nine solo) in his 14-year career. "I had a teammate say, 'Just run fast and get down there; they don't know you're the long snapper.' I've taken that to heart."

In college at Pittsburgh, coaches encouraged Cal Adomitis to stay busy by joining in on blocking drills, tackling circuits, "everything other than live scrimmage periods. It's a little different at the pro level," says Adomitis, who signed with Cincinnati

"EVERYBODY THINKS ALL YOU DO IS BEND OVER AND GET THE BALL BACK TO THE HOLDER. BUT THERE'S A HELL OF A LOT MORE INVOLVED."

atoned three months later with his 100-yard interception return in a Super Bowl XLIII triumph over the Cardinals, his gaffe remains the quintessential example of the position's unexpected nuance. As he explains, "I gave it that extra oomph. I ain't take into account the adrenaline."

Look at the men who look at football upside down and you will find a range of grips, stances and deliveries; like a golfer's swing or a pitcher's motion, no two snappers execute the same way. "Some guys look at the punter, and some guys are straight down at the ball, or at the defense," says the Chargers' Josh Harris. "It's different for everybody." But the demand for perfection in what happens next is universal. "For field goals, the ideal is two and a half rotations [of the football], and anything under 1.3 [seconds] from snap to kick is considered good," the Vikings' Andrew DePaola says. "For



as an undrafted free agent, was the lone long snapper to make a practice squad and was activated to replace the injured Harris in Week 2. "They're not as gung ho about me jumping in."

Long snappers have earned at least some street cred, a far cry from the widespread skepticism of several decades ago. For instance, when a 1988 NFL draft preview published in *USA Today* dared to list "long snapper" as one of Washington's key needs, an un-bylined brief in the *Los Angeles Times* scoffed, "What next, summer long-snapper camps?"

CHRIS RUBIO IS talking about farts. Specifically, the acoustic differences between mouse farts and elephant farts. Pachyderms, you see, tend to pass gas low and slow, sounding more like a rumble than a rip. Mice toots, however, come out fast and squeaky, like

the small puff of air that helps eye doctors diagnose glaucoma—or, Rubio explains, the ideal long snap.

Sporting a shaved head, salted goatee and yellow hoodie bearing the name of his business, the 47-year-old founder of Rubio Long Snapping is standing inside his home garage, a cavernous space of 15-foot ceilings, green turf floor and a sign on the door announcing it as The Factory. There is a small framed picture of the local town's gateway sign, digitally edited by one of Rubio's friends so that it now proclaims to visitors: WELCOME TO HISTORIC LEWISTON IDAHO THE LONG SNAPPING CAPITAL OF THE WORLD.

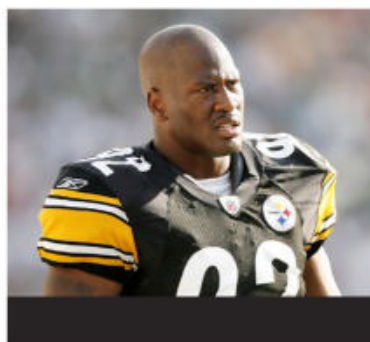
Tucked away some five hours east of Seattle, this city of fewer than 35,000 residents is an unlikely place to find an even unlikelier guru of the position. A walk-on at UCLA in the late 1990s, the Southern California native took a job teaching sixth-grade history after college. That's when he made the bold pivot to the then-untapped space of private long-snapper training. "Started with one lesson a month," Rubio says, "and then it boomed." Now he doesn't bat an eye when a fourth grader enrolls in one of his nearly two dozen annual camps around the country.

His success is on display at

Among the key reasons for this shift are the growing appetite of college coaches to award long-snapper scholarships and safety-minded rule changes—since 2010, an NFL defender's entire body must be lined up outside of the snapper's shoulder pads—that made the position more palatable to parents. (Three members of Rubio's high school class of '19, all of whom started with him at age 9, received full D-I rides.)

But there are also those critical of the industry Rubio represents, and to whom it caters. "I think step one is removing barriers to entry for the position," says Cardona, the NFL's only Latino long snapper. "My experience with long snapping was learning it on my own, just me and my dad working at it. But there were certainly gatekeepers that ranked players nationally that I had to appease. Unfortunately those came with monetary costs that were tough for my family to afford."

Rubio doesn't dispute that he has influence over head coaches, at one point launching into a story about a time that he "got on basically a conference call" with coaches from Georgia Southern to vouch for Ryan Langan, then a relatively unknown recruit from



"S---, I THOUGHT IT WAS GREAT," HARRISON SAYS OF HIS LONE LONG SNAP, "TILL I LOOKED BACK AND SAW IT WAS OUT THE BACK OF THE END ZONE."

his garage turned training center, in the form of about a hundred hanging pennants from some of the NCAA teams for whom his clients have played, from LSU and Oregon to Division III Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology (the Fightin' Engineers!) in Terre Haute, Ind. And those are just the ones that people send him: In less than two decades on the job, Rubio has coached more than 1,000 college-bound snappers, including eight of the 32 who started this season on active NFL rosters. "I [initially] thought, 'Who the hell would pay for this?'" Rubio says. Now he charges \$365 a head for camps and \$250 an hour for one-on-one lessons (not counting lodging in, and transportation to and from, north-central Idaho).

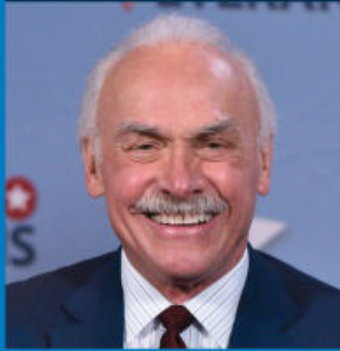
Earlier this year, an episode of the *Freakonomics* podcast summarized the evolution of long snappers as "a classic example of specialization in the labor market."

small-town Nebraska who "had never snapped in front of, like, more than 11 people and two goats . . . and sure as hell he ended up getting a full scholarship." But, when asked whether he thinks the specialization of long snapping has shut out those with less access to resources, he says, "I would say no. And if anyone ever contacts me, like, 'Maybe we just can't afford it'? O.K., I'll work on a plan. I have no problem with that, as long as you're dedicated."

A **SA FREE AGENT** during training camp this year, Tinker kept in shape at his home outside Austin by snapping at a track hurdle set to the rough height of an NFL punter's waist and asking his 4-year-old son's friends' parents to act as a makeshift scout team. But he wasn't out for long: He joined the Seahawks the week before their opener after longtime starter

SALUTE TO VETERANS

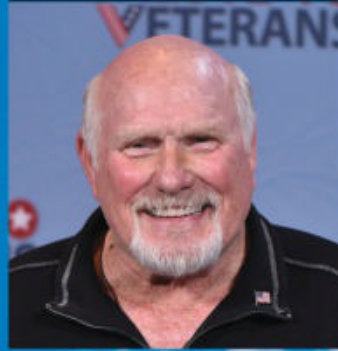
★ Rocky Bleier ★



U.S. Army Veteran,
4-time Champion,
Pittsburgh



★ Terry Bradshaw ★



TV Host & Hall of Famer,
4-time Champion,
Pittsburgh

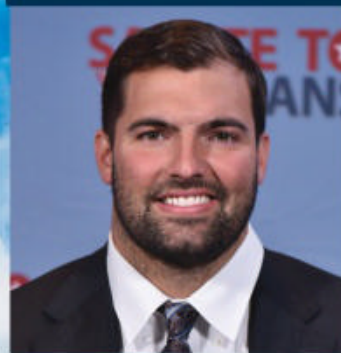
★ Greg Gadson ★



U.S. Army Veteran,
Honorary Captain,
2-time Champion with New York



★ Alejandro Villanueva ★



U.S. Army Veteran,
2-time Pro Bowler,
Baltimore



★ Joe Cardona ★



U.S. Navy Veteran,
2-time Champion,
New England



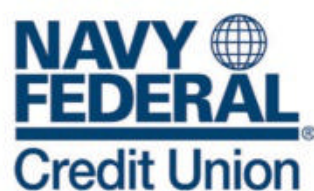
Salute to Veterans is a national television series that honors and pays tribute to our nation's veterans, active duty service members, military families and patriotic supporters. The inspirational and educational program offers insightful discussion, resources and solutions for the ongoing issues our veterans face daily. The series shares the stories of distinguished veterans who have served their country, overcame personal challenges in their lives and made a difference in their communities, while inspiring others to do the same.

SALUTE TO VETERANS

salutetoveterans.org

The Salute to Veterans Series is made possible by the generous support of our partners.

Presented by



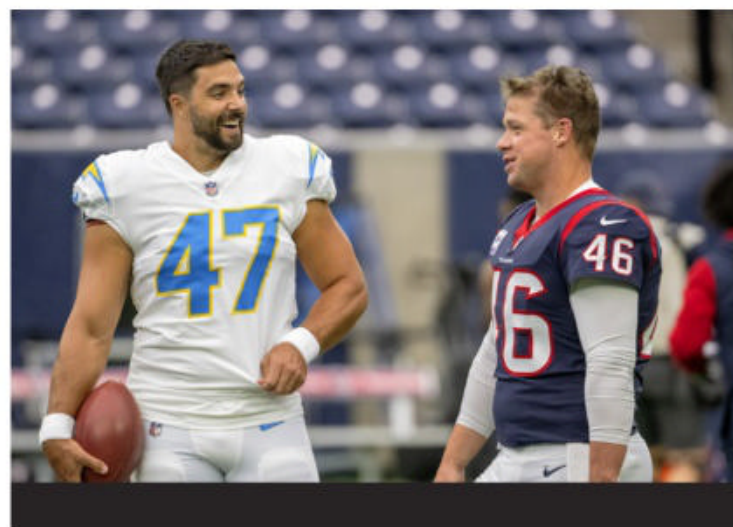
Tyler Ott dislocated a shoulder in practice. “I’ve been a mercenary,” says Tinker, 32, now on his fifth team since 2020. “So it was really easy to snap back into that rhythm.”

The winding nature of his career—last season, Tinker snapped for the Bucs and Raiders in addition to winning a Super Bowl ring as part of the Rams’ practice squad—reflects another downside to the boom. “There’s just no turnover,” Ott says. “There’s always eight guys on the street ready to step in . . . [because] once you become stable, you can play for so long that it [becomes] hard to make it in as a new guy.”

The lengthy tenures that some NFL snappers

actually *decreased* (from about 1% to 0.7%) since ’12.

As two of four snappers currently serving as team representatives in the sprawling 2,500-member NFL players’ association—the Jets’ Thomas Hennessy and the Browns’ Charley Hughlett are the others, along with a handful of first, second and third alternates—Cardona and Ott talk often about what it would take to change the position’s financial landscape. If NFL snappers do end up banding together to flex their collective muscle, it wouldn’t be the first time: In 2019, the season before fans were first allowed to cast Pro Bowl ballots for them, Cardona and others successfully lobbied the league’s competition committee



STARTING SOMETHING

The record payday for Harris (left and above, No. 47) might mean more for colleagues like Houston’s Jon Weeks.

enjoy—Jansen holds the current title at 14 years, after the Lions’ Don Muhlbach (17) and the Cowboys’ L.P. Ladouceur (16) both played their last games in 2020—have also produced an undesirable effect on wages, as the modest potential monetary gains of free agency often pale in comparison to the appeal of stability. “Most guys, they’ve got a good thing going,” Jansen says. A significant stride was made over the spring when Josh Harris, coming off an All-Pro season with the Falcons, inked a four-year deal with the Chargers worth a record \$1.9 million guaranteed. His deal’s average annual value (\$1.4 million) is higher than anyone at the position (21 long snappers are scheduled to earn more than \$1 million in ’22). But, as several snappers interviewed for this story noted, their average salary leaguewide relative to the salary cap has

to let them vote for their representatives to that year’s game themselves.

So much has changed about what that *Freakonomics* podcast dubbed “the most monotonous job in the world.” But as long as men have been putting footballs in play, they have also held the belief that what they are doing truly matters, dissenters be damned.

It’s why Tinker cherishes pregame warmups, chatting up fellow snappers, swapping stories about what it is like to see the world upside down. And it’s why, a few weeks before his injury, after practice on a sunny August day, Ott watched with a smile as his 2-year-old son, Liam, waddled onto the field at the Seahawks’ training complex, grabbed a football off the turf and, totally unprompted, folded himself over and flung the ball between his legs. □

Boost Testosterone

Drive & Peak Performance



\$3 COUPON redeemable at all Drug, Grocery and Health Food stores Nationwide

EXPIRES 03/31/23 MANUFACTURERS COUPON

SAVE \$3.00
ANY IRWIN NATURALS PRODUCT

Consumer: Redeemable at retail locations only. Not valid for online or mail-order purchases. Retailer: Irwin Naturals will reimburse you for the face value plus 8 (cents) handling provided it is redeemed by a consumer at the time of purchase on the brand specified. Coupons not properly redeemed will be void and held. Reproduction by any party by any means is expressly prohibited. Any other use constitutes fraud. Irwin Naturals reserves the right to deny reimbursement (due to misredemption activity) and/or request proof of purchase for coupon(s) submitted. Mail to: CMS Dept. 10363, Irwin Naturals, 801 Union Pacific Blvd Ste 5, Laredo, TX 78045-9475. Cash value: .001 (cents). Void where taxed or restricted. ONE COUPON PER PURCHASE. Not valid for mail order/websites. Retail only.

0710363-015147

These statements have not been evaluated by the Food & Drug Administration. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent any disease.

FREE!

2022 Kennedy Half Dollar

- ◆ Uncirculated Condition
- ◆ Low Mintage

Along with your **FREE** coin, you'll also receive a handpicked trial selection of fascinating coins from our No-Obligation Coins-On-Approval Service, from which you may purchase any or none of the coins – return balance within 15 days – with option to cancel at any time.

Special Offer for New Customers Only Ages 18+

Mail Coupon Today! For Faster Service
Visit: LittletonCoin.com/Specials



Actual Size



Littleton
Coin Company®

Serving Collectors Since 1945

©2022 LCC, Inc.

Dept. 6XZ439

☒ **YES!** Please send me the following:

QTY	DESCRIPTION	TOTAL
1	2022 Kennedy Half Dollar	FREE
	Shipping	FREE
	Total \$	FREE

Mail to:
 **Littleton Coin Co. Dept. 6XZ439**
1309 Mt. Eustis Rd
Littleton NH 03561-3737

REQUEST MUST BE RECEIVED WITHIN 30 DAYS

Name _____ Please print clearly

Address _____ Apt# _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

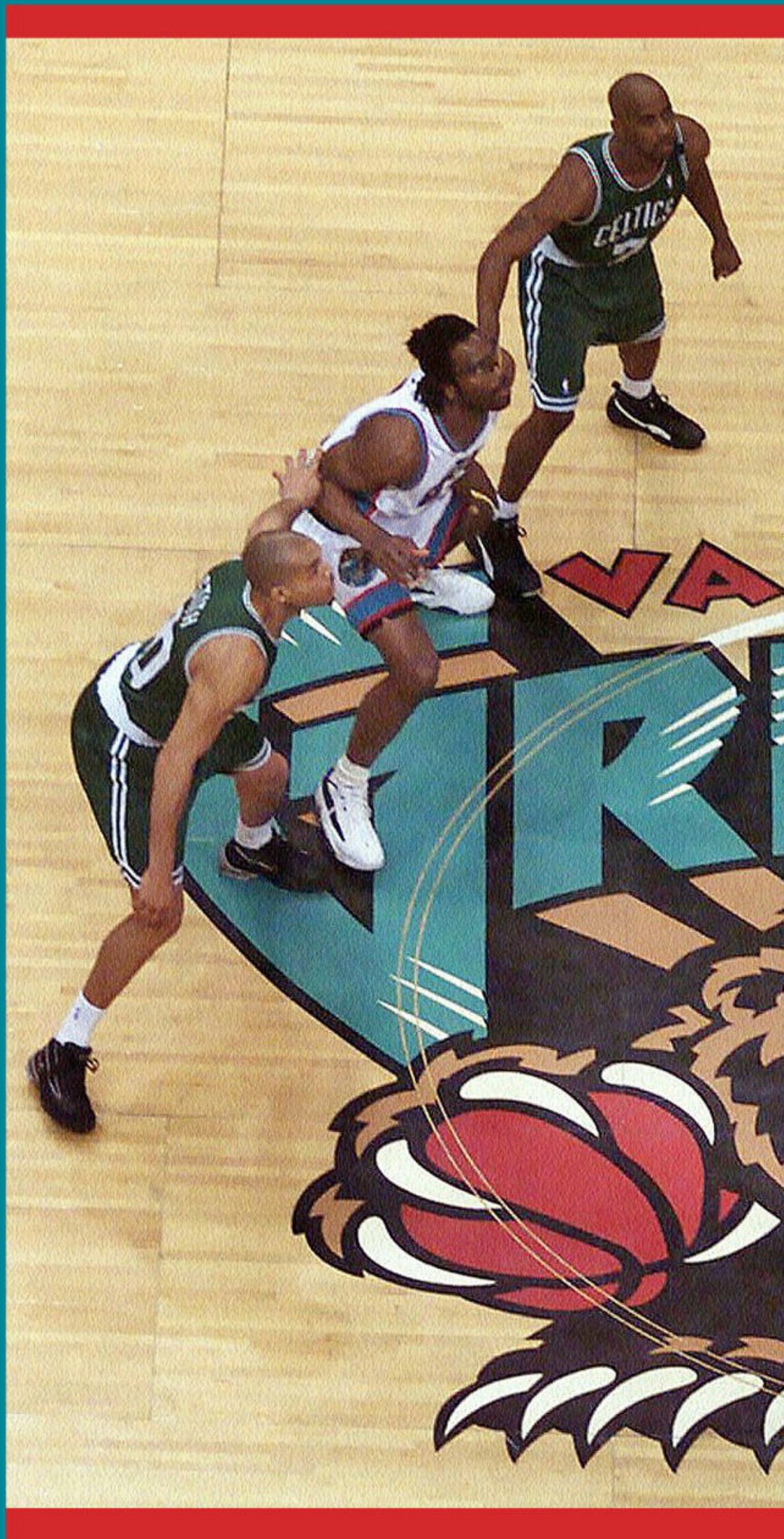
E-Mail _____

BY L. JON WERTHEIM

WITH ONE OF THE BEST YOUNG CORES

Northern Lightweights

PHOTOGRAPH BY
CHUCK STOODY/AP



BUT THIS FRANCHISE'S PAST—A LONG—

IN THE NBA, TODAY'S GRIZZLIES HAVE A BRIGHT FUTURE.



CANADIAN ACHIN'

The NBA had high hopes for an expansion team in Vancouver. But after six seasons, in which they won only 22% of their games, the Grizzlies left town.

FORGOTTEN CHAPTER IN VANCOUVER—IS JUST AS INTRIGUING

It was one of those hinge points in Steve Francis's life. He would be transitioning from college to the pros, from unpaid to paid.

Just as Francis's unlikely backstory—a rough childhood, a junior college transfer, a transcendent season at Maryland—was rocketing around the basketball cosmos, so, too, was speculation he was going to be the first pick in the 1999 NBA draft, the new backcourt star of the Bulls as they rebuilt from the Michael Jordan era.

For all the players who worry about whether they'll be drafted, the great suspense for Francis was learning where and for whom he would be working. Better still, the draft was being held at the MCI Center in Washington, D.C., a few miles from where Francis had been raised by his grandmother, in Takoma Park, Md. At the event, his agents were flanked by his Reebok representatives, who were flanked by publicists. A huge mural of him—“Godzilla-size,” as the *Washingtonian* characterized it—covered a wall adjacent to the arena.

But an evening that should have marked one of the great highlights in Francis's life broke unhappily. With the No. 1 pick, the Bulls selected Elton Brand. When Francis was then chosen second, he wore the look not of a soon-to-be NBA millionaire, but of a man conscripted to serve in a foreign land.

Which, essentially, he was.

Francis was selected by the Vancouver Grizzlies, an expansion team in 1995 located in what by any measure was—and is—one of the Great Cities of the World. The franchise was about to make Francis its centerpiece and wealthy almost to the point of abstraction.

Francis, though, could not even fake joy. As the draftee slumped to the lectern, NBA commissioner David Stern sidled up and gently encouraged him to smile. Which Francis did not. He'd never before left the U.S., and he wasn't pleased about the prospects of doing so for this job.

During what was supposed to be a giddy welcome interview, Francis was asked by the Grizzlies' flagship radio station what he knew about Canada. And he minced no words. “It's cold. It rains a lot. It takes all your money.” Francis told an interviewer: “Hopefully tomorrow when I wake up I'll be happy.”

As it turned out, Francis didn't even make it to the disgruntled-employee phase. He begrudgingly visited Vancouver over the summer—a trip that soured when a woman at the airport ticket counter in Canada side-eyed Francis and his coterie and asked, “Is that a rap group?” But that was it. Before the season started,

the Grizzlies traded Francis to the Rockets for four veteran players. That year, the NBA's northernmost team would once again finish in the nether regions of the standings. And within two years, the franchise would leave Western Canada for West Tennessee.

“I will never forget that day when I had to tell the employees not only that we were leaving Vancouver, but that the team was moving to the banks of a muddy river in Tennessee,” recalls former Grizzlies president



Andy Dolich, who, for the record, relocated to Memphis with the team. “But there really wasn't much choice.”

It took a while (it's been 27 years since Stern installed the expansion team), but today's Grizzlies are finally darlings of the NBA, cult favorites among discerning fans, led by Ja Morant, a sort of proto-Francis—another 6' 3" guard with a first step as explosive as his backstory is unlikely. The franchise has now been in Memphis almost four times as long as it was in Vancouver, but now is as good a time as any to consider the Grizzlies' origin story and their misbegotten six seasons in their original home.

Vancouver represented a market that seemed to offer so much: a multicultural fan base, humming with new money; and tentacles in the tech sector, figuring squarely in the Pacific Rim. The Grizzlies would christen a new downtown arena, GM Place, which



NORTH FACES

Unlike Francis (from left), Reeves and Abdur-Rahim liked their time in Vancouver, where the latter (above) became the team's best player.

it would share with the NHL's Canucks. Vancouver was even the first NBA team to have its own website. And yet, in the mid-1990s, the NBA could not make it work there. This was the equivalent of a team with a stacked roster that simply never coalesced.

Why did the Grizzlies fail in Vancouver? An autopsy report reveals no obvious cause of death. No single catastrophic event. No lone bad actor. This was the organizational equivalent of *death by a thousand cuts*. The Grizzlies' time in Vancouver was marked by countless humiliations and hurdles, large and small, real and perceived—from a rumor among NBA players that Vancouver lacked grocery stores, to the

very real challenge of a stubbornly low exchange rate and the struggle of bringing (losing) NBA basketball to an NHL stronghold.

For all the unchecked growth and towering successes the NBA has enjoyed—and earned—over the past, say, 30 years, the Vancouver Grizzlies figure prominently in the loss column. Referred to as “David’s Folly,” one of the rare missteps by Stern, the NBA’s inability to accommodate a team in a dazzling world-class city (or vice versa) remains, if not a mystery, a stinging missed opportunity.

I T STARTED WITH the Concorde. Or rather, the decline of the Concorde. For three decades, supersonic jet service across the Atlantic made it so that, from New York, a voyage to Europe was no more onerous than a trip to, say, Dallas. When Stern began



DISH UPON A STAR

Morant (center) is exactly the type of franchise cornerstone the Grizzlies never had in Vancouver.

as NBA commissioner, in 1984, he spoke openly and eagerly about using the Concorde to make the NBA truly global—of Atlanta playing against Berlin, or Cleveland playing Barcelona.

But the decline and eventual end of Concorde travel squelched Stern's plans. Apart from, rightly, upending his ideas about progress—"when else in history has transportation progress gone backwards? How could it take longer today to fly from Paris to New York than it did in 1980?" Stern asked me shortly before his death, in 2020—it caused him to rethink his international growth plans.

Instead of planting teams in Europe, Stern and the NBA would, more modestly, explore expanding in North America. By 1993, it was clear the league would park two teams north of the border. Toronto, a city the size of Chicago that already had a World Series-winning baseball team, was a no-brainer. The other would go to Vancouver, which, for all its civic assets and its reputation, would present more of a challenge.

Vancouver was a relatively small market with a modest commercial base. The NBA had demanded the two Canadian expansion teams each sell 12,500 season tickets by Jan. 1, 1995, but a month before the deadline Vancouver had sold just 10,000. It took a Christmas miracle to meet the threshold: On Dec. 24, a Canadian firm, Shoppers Drug Mart, purchased the needed seats.

Beyond the economics, Vancouver's customs and immigration procedures were notoriously onerous. Foreign travelers sometimes reported spending less time on flights than waiting to have their passports stamped—not ideal for the farthest franchise from the NBA's nerve center in New York.

And maybe above all: It offered little in the way of basketball tradition. In 1994, former Knicks coach Stu Jackson was, with Stern's lobbying, announced as Vancouver's general manager. Jackson once recalled that during the NBA's All-Star weekend in '95, he took questions on a local Vancouver sports-talk radio show: "The first call was from an elderly lady. She said, 'Some years ago I saw the Globetrotters, and I was wondering if you plan to employ any of those tactics with our team.' Her word: *tactics*."

Lionel Hollins, who was the Grizzlies' interim coach for the 1999–2000 season, tells a story about walking out for an exhibition game. "We got on the court. The rim is not high enough. They didn't know how to measure it," Hollins says. "It was a different experience for all of the people around the NBA, and it was a learning experience for the people in Canada."

Compounding matters, the other NBA owners

were something other than hospitable. As a privilege for joining the league, Vancouver's original owner, Arthur Griffiths, had to pay a \$125 million expansion fee, spare change in today's sports economy but a steep increase from the \$32.5 million the Timberwolves and Magic had paid to join the NBA in 1988.

More critically, legacy owners had bristled when Orlando had effectively jumped the line in landing Shaquille O'Neal (1992) and Penny Hardaway ('93, in a trade involving Chris Webber) through the draft. So those owners prevailed on Stern to ban the new Canadian teams from getting the No. 1 pick in any of their first three seasons.

They were also forbidden from spending more

riposted, "we forage for food and occasionally get an airlift.") Othella Harrington, one of the players traded for Francis in 1999, brought Francis-level unhappiness to Vancouver. Harrington complained so incessantly about the rainy weather that a Vancouver executive once wondered whether he was asking to be traded. Harrington corrected him: "I'm *begging* to be traded." When Doug West was shipped to Vancouver—from Minnesota, no less!—he was asked how he reacted to the news. "I downed 17 Heinekens," he said.

Benoit Benjamin, the inimitable center who played briefly for Vancouver during the 1995–96 season, was, allegedly, skeptical of Canadian banks. A former Grizzlies employee recalls that Benjamin demanded to

AN AUTOPSY REPORT REVEALS NO OBVIOUS CAUSE OF DEATH. VANCOUVER'S WAS THE ORGANIZATIONAL EQUIVALENT OF DEATH BY A THOUSAND CUTS.

than two-thirds of their total salary cap allotment, a safeguard against a lavish free-agent signing.

Jackson, meanwhile, was a novice executive, and, apart from assessing basketball talent, he and Vancouver's front office had to consider how potential players would adjust to living in a foreign country, often thousands of miles (and incalculable cultural miles) from home.

It was hardly predictable which players would adjust well and which wouldn't. Bryant "Big Country" Reeves, the Grizzlies' first draft pick (No. 6, in 1995), hailed from tiny Gans, Okla. Dolich recalls Reeves joking on the team bus, "You know the largest public works projects in Gans? My house." Yet Reeves had no complaints about the Pacific Northwest and, despite injuries that limited his effectiveness, he was a fan favorite. Likewise, Shareef Abdur-Rahim (the No. 3 pick in '96), who hailed from suburban Atlanta and played college ball at Cal, speaks gushingly to this day about living and working in Vancouver. Perhaps not coincidentally, he was, unquestionably, the best player in Vancouver Grizzlies history.

OTHER DRAFT PICKS and free agents, though, were less fond of this quirky, far-flung market. It was George Lynch, a Grizzlies forward by way of free agency for 53 games, who once remarked there were no grocery stores in Vancouver. ("Yes," one columnist

receive his biweekly paychecks in cash—no small feat on a \$3.975 million salary, as Benjamin was earning at the time. "We'd be at the Ritz-Carlton in Miami, or wherever," says the former staffer, "and they'd say, 'We can cash the check, but there's a huge surcharge.' 'No problem.'"

Other financial concerns were more legitimate. More than two-thirds of the Grizzlies' revenues went to paying the salaries of players and coaches, and the exchange rate worked to the team's detriment. "You are taking in revenues in Canadian dollars and paying salaries in American dollars," says Dolich. "When the Canadian dollar was trading 65 or 70 cents, yeah, that's a challenge."

So, too, was the tax rate. Hollins once told a *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* reporter that the first time the Grizzlies presented players their paychecks in the locker room and they saw the various deductions and withholdings on their stubs, it did not go over well. In truth, Canada's tax rate was scarcely higher than that of many U.S. markets (especially when accounting for universal health care), but perception mattered. Players spoke openly about the financial hit of playing in Vancouver, and their agents acted accordingly.

Whatever their tax liability, players tried to defuse it by limiting their time in Canada to fewer than 175 days per year. The upshot: The day the NBA season ended, most players returned to the U.S.—and Vancouver's

best-laid plans for summer basketball camps and offseason promotions went to hell.

Then there was the on-court product. The Grizzlies were, expectedly, awful in their first season, almost a rite of passage for expansion franchises in virtually any sport. Vancouver won the first two games it ever played . . . and then lost 19 straight, finishing its maiden season an NBA-worst 15–67.

The Grizzlies managed to finish that first year 14th out of 29 in league attendance, decent given the novelty factor. But the following season, Vancouver drew slightly smaller crowds as the team, impossibly, fared even worse, finishing at 14–68. It was around this time that *SportsCenter* anchors were calling the Grizzlies “The Gristle.” At the *Los Angeles Times* they were “the Clippers with rain.”

IN THE LOCKOUT-SHORTENED 1998–99 season, Vancouver started promisingly, 3–3, only to finish 8–42. The following season, average attendance dipped to 13,899, third-lowest in the league.

Like competing siblings, the Grizzlies were, reflexively, yoked to the Toronto Raptors, the other Canadian team to enter the league at the same time. Initially, they were comparably bad. In the Raptors’ first season they finished 21–61. But Toronto’s size and night-life and relative proximity to the U.S. made it more appealing among players. And the Raptors drew fans, ranking No. 3 in average attendance at the cavernous SkyDome that maiden year.

And after three desultory campaigns, in the summer of 1998, Toronto acquired Vince Carter in a draft-night swap with the Warriors. Carter was a charismatic, heart-stoppingly entertaining player in the mold of Michael Jordan, down to their shared Carolina prove nance. Nicknamed, inevitably, “Air Canada,” Carter was precisely what the Raptors needed, and Toronto reached the postseason shortly after his arrival.

Vancouver had no such savior. Its next four lottery picks, after Abdur-Rahim: Antonio Daniels, Mike Bibby, Francis and Stromile Swift, none of whom were ever voted onto an NBA All-Star team in Vancouver. Mostly the franchise acquired veterans past their prime. A long-running effort to trade for local-boy-makes-good Steve Nash never materialized. The team was early in targeting Yao Ming, figuring he would be a star by dint of his skills and his connection to Vancouver’s considerable Asian community. But Yao didn’t enter the NBA until 2002. At which point it was too late.

By 1999, with the team hemorrhaging money, Vancouver’s principal owner, Craig McCaw (who’d bought the team in ’96 from Griffiths), was actively

looking for a buyer. He found one, for \$160 million, in midwest industrialist Michael Heisley, who, fittingly, “specialized in purchasing and turning around failing companies.” At his 2000 introductory press conference, Heisley spoke rosily of Western Canada and expressed a commitment to making it work in the local market.

The commitment lasted only so long.

By multiple accounts, Heisley (who died in 2014 from complications of a stroke) took a look at the balance sheets; the considerable payroll obligations, including Reeves’s hefty \$65 million contract; the modest ticket base and corporate sponsorships—and he shuddered. Days after the sale, he estimated operating losses at \$50 million per season.

TALE OF TWO CITIES

While fans in Memphis (right) are buzzing about the Grizzlies, the franchise’s relocation in 2001 has left a void in Vancouver.



Within a year of the purchase, Heisley was touring other cities. They were happy to welcome an NBA franchise. And he was happy to eat the \$30 million relocation fee for leaving Vancouver. Anaheim was an obvious choice, though, according to Dolich, Heisley was told by the city that to come he would also have to buy the NHL’s struggling Mighty Ducks. Las Vegas welcomed Heisley, horrifying some NBA owners, still concerned back then about the potential overlap of sports and gambling. Louisville was on the destination docket. Same for New Orleans.

Another Mississippi River city, though, quickly emerged as a favorite. The Memphis bid was going to be driven by FedEx, with its hub there, and was reported to entail renaming the team the Express and

changing the colors to FedEx's orange and blue. That particular pact never materialized, but the sale did, and so a team in Tennessee would keep the name of a bear native to British Columbia.

On March 26, 2001, Heisley announced his Grizzlies would move to Memphis over the summer. They would play at first in a college hoops venue, the Pyramid (which has since been transformed into a Bass Pro Shop), while a downtown venue, christened by FedEx, was constructed. Only a small cohort of the Grizzlies' original employees would make the move. For years, the team's attendance in Memphis didn't much exceed the crowds in Canada. But it was a new home.

The final bill of particulars: In six seasons, the



Vancouver Grizzlies won only 22% of their games, the lowest winning percentage for a franchise in NBA history. It goes without saying, they never made the playoffs. They never minted an All-Star. They never made significant inroads with the community.

Stern would later admit to ESPN the Grizzlies marked one of his deepest regrets. "As it turned out," he said, "I wish we hadn't had the Vancouver experience. Great city—and we disappointed them, and we disappointed ourselves." (The commissioner made that concession in 2008, the same year the Seattle SuperSonics relocated to Oklahoma City, leaving the Pacific Northwest with only the Portland Trail Blazers.)

The Grizzlies' last game at GM Place was played on

April 14, 2001. It was not a sellout. More fitting still: They led the Rockets by 19 points in the second half but managed to lose, 100–95. There was no formal ceremony or public acknowledgment this would be Vancouver's final home game. But it doubled as a wake.

Amid tears after the game, itinerant forward Tony Massenburg—the rare free agent to play in Vancouver, leave and then come back—told reporters, "I've been a lot of places. I've closed out a lot of arenas. But this one was different." Another veteran, Grant Long, predicted basketball would be back. "Vancouver shouldn't worry. Another NBA team will be around in a few years."

MORE THAN 20 years later, Long's prediction has yet to come true after the team, in the manner of a retreating grizzly bear, tiptoed out of town. But look around, and there are more than a few imprints confirming NBA basketball once existed here. You'll see the odd, faded ABDUR-RAHIM or BIBBY or REEVES jersey, worn often with hipster irony, and other tchotchkes from some long-ago giveaway night.

More important, there are hoops all over the area. Parks once used for roller hockey now feature basketball leagues. It's no coincidence that Western Canada has become an unlikely font of NBA talent—not least forward Brandon Clarke, who was born in Vancouver, in 1996, and now plays, ironically, for Memphis.

A few years ago, a Vancouver filmmaker, Kat Jayme, who grew up watching the Grizzlies, made an excellent documentary, *Finding Big Country*, about her search for Reeves, who played in every Vancouver Grizzlies season and then, when the team moved, repaired to rural Oklahoma. Very cleverly, the movie doubles as an homage to a forgotten team. Getting the film financed, Jayme says, was a challenge. "People said, 'All Vancouver cares about is hockey.' I was like, 'I know this can find an audience.' It came out and it kind of exploded."

Galvanized by that success, she made another documentary, more directly about the Grizzlies' time in Vancouver, treating the decline as a kind of whodunnit. Jayme initially titled the film *The Worst Team Ever*—but after some reporting she changed it to *The Grizzlie Truth*. She hopes it will be widely released in 2023.

Not unlike the jilted fans two hours south in Seattle, Jayme holds out hope the NBA will give her city another chance. She says she runs into countless people around town who share that dream. "The climate is different. The appetite is there." What makes her so sure? "Because the pain of losing what we had is still so strong." □

BY GREG BISHOP

...

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
KOHJIRO KINNO

Same As _____
Always,
And Like _____
**Never
Before**

***WHEN CANCER ATTACKED BRANDON THOMAS, CUTTING
OFF A PART OF HIS BODY REPRESENTED HIS BEST CHANCE TO
KEEP LIVING, TO KEEP DOING SO MANY THINGS HE LOVED.
BUT NONE MATTERED MORE THAN FOOTBALL***



Brandon Thomas wants to play on a broken foot today.

This explains everything about the hulking high school middle linebacker—but it doesn't say exactly what you might think it says about him.

Thomas is the type who elicits fear, who loves contact and delivers jarring blows. He's big—6' 2", 227 pounds—and he's hunting for college scholarships. But as he drives to the first game of his final high school season, on the first Friday in September, he hasn't yet transitioned into beast mode. He slows to let another car pass with a smile and a wave. He asks, "Should I turn the music down?"

Of course not! Middle linebackers don't turn the music down!

Instead, Thomas cranks the volume on his "football mix," blaring hip-hop and trap music, though it's unclear whether he sees how the lyrics speak to his last two years: "I'm willing to die for this s---. . . Hold up / Wait a minute / Y'all thought I was finished. . . Ball so hard . . . we ain't even 'posed to be here. . ."

His legs pump like jackhammers, and his body rocks back and forth as he drives, the car seeming to sway with him, seat belt straining. This game is pivotal to the football ambitions of an 18-year-old with sweetest-kid-alive vibes, who's hell-bent on total destruction and who also knows: It's just a game. Not at all important.

At least, he knows he's *supposed* to think that way, after everything that's happened to him.

Growing up in eastern Washington, the younger of two boys, Thomas was raised in a family of athletes and academics. He wanted to be two things: a superhero—he loved Spider-Man—and a football star. His mother, Melanie, refused at first to let him play football, but it was all he ever talked about. He wanted to be like Ray Lewis: physical, aggressive, violent. She heard her son say things like, "There's just a feeling to [football], a goosebumps vibe I can't explain."

In fifth grade, Melanie relented.

At Central Valley High, coach Ryan Butner loved everything about Thomas. His leadership, his work ethic, his overall disposition. Plus, the kid could play; he hit hard, patrolling the middle of a stout defense. In 2019, Thomas's sophomore season, he earned varsity



MOLD SCHOOL

Before Thomas lost his leg, and before he fought his way back onto the field, an uncle took a plaster casting of his about-to-be-amputated foot.



all-league honors, and he was only 15, still growing. A “recruitable athlete,” Butner says.

Three years later, on a home game day, Thomas pulls into the parking lot to find fans setting up a tailgate. And as he walks across cute little phrases chalked onto the pavement—WELCOME TO YOUR NEXT ADVENTURE . . . KEEP GOING—he sheds his sweetness. Passing a stuffed bear at the entry to the locker room, he yells, “It’s going to be lit!”

Brandon Thomas wants to play on a broken foot today. But it’s not what you think. On May 29, 2020, a week short of his 16th birthday—and in the earliest, most chaotic days of the COVID-19 pandemic—his lower right leg was amputated, just below the kneecap. And this morning, four hours before he pulled into a disabled parking spot at Sarge Alberts Field, he noticed a crack in the base of his prosthetic.

“Don’t matter to me,” he says. “I’ll play on a broken foot.”

THOMAS WOKE UP around 11 a.m. on game day—classes hadn’t started yet and, well, he’s 18. Soon he was watching game film, eyes still droopy, half asleep. Eventually, he grabbed the PlayStation in the living room and cued up *Rocket League*, a combo soccer-and-monster-truck-rally game. Against a couch rested a pair of crutches. And there, tucked in a corner, near the front window, a statue of . . . a golden human foot?

“Oh,” Brandon said, not looking up. “That’s my foot.”

So, uh, what’s up with that?

Thomas’s uncle, Aaron Williams, made it for him. Uncle Aaron is not a professional artist. But he does have skills. After Brandon’s foot swelled to more than twice its normal size, and just before the amputation, Uncle Aaron concocted this plan: He bought a mop bucket, placed Brandon’s “gigantic hoof” inside and poured a mold mixture around it. When that set, he filled the mold with plaster, dried it, sanded it, inserted

a bolt for stability, sealed it with white primer and painted his creation gold. He coated everything with a clear polyurethane and mounted it on a stone onto which he'd inscribed *Deuteronomy 31:6*.

Be strong and of a good courage . . .

IN MID-FEBRUARY 2020, after a routine workout with Central Valley's track team, Thomas's right ankle started to throb, pain shooting upward like he'd never felt before. He wasn't the oft-injured type; even when he'd fractured a growth plate in his left knee, when he was 14, it healed without surgery. So, this? Had to be a sprain, perhaps from all the 42-inch box jumps he'd just knocked out. Maybe a fractured bone. But that heals.

revealed the cancer had not spread to Brandon's lungs. When Melanie then rang her son, and he answered in the school cafeteria, he heard her scream and, he says, "blacked out." Classmates told him later that he nearly collapsed, tears racing down his cheeks. Melanie, on the other end, caught the whole thing; Brandon had put his phone in his pocket without hanging up.

She heard something like 50 students yelling and she thought: *Maybe we'll be O.K., after all.*

MELANIE AND HER HUSBAND, both now 42, met as teenagers at the Burger King in Jacksonville where they worked. They had a son, Josh, when they were 18, before Devon played defensive end at Louisville and later became a college sports administrator,

THOMAS'S PARENTS PUSHED TO POSTPONE HIS PROCEDURE, BIRTHDAY, BUT HE TOLD THEM NO. "IT ALREADY DIDN'T

After two weeks without improvement, Melanie took Brandon to an orthopedist, where a doctor, bewilderingly, said, "Gosh, you guys are having a tough day."

Puzzled glances all around. "Not particularly? What's up?"

"Nobody likes to hear that you have cancer."

"Like, you're saying he might die?" asked Brandon's father, Devon, who'd joined the meeting on speakerphone from his commute home.

Yes.

This wasn't just any cancer—Thomas was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, which begins in the cells that form bones but can spread all over. A few years earlier, also in eastern Washington, another teenage football player, this one with a scholarship to Idaho, had died from the same illness at roughly the same age.

What mattered most: How far had the osteosarcoma spread? If it had reached Thomas's lungs, the odds of survival plummeted from roughly 70% to around 25%. Either way, doctors were recommending amputation of the ankle and foot, both of which Brandon assumed he needed to play football.

He looked at his mom. Eventually he would ask *Why?* but not yet. Instead, he said, with such conviction that Melanie had no choice but to believe him: "If I lose my foot, it's O.K. I just want to live."

For now, he asked Melanie to take him back to school. He didn't want to miss his American Sign Language class. He wanted to experience as many days as possible being anything but a cancer patient.

A week later, doctors phoned Melanie. A CT scan

zigzagging around, everywhere from Louisville to Idaho to Central Florida to Gonzaga, where he is now. Melanie became a college student success adviser. Josh played basketball at Eastern Washington.

In 2020, they would confront Brandon's cancer together. He told them, "I'm gonna go crush this," though privately he would look back at every "bad" thing he'd ever done and wonder whether some sort of karma had gotten him here. He stopped feeling like himself. And he started to recognize just how much had changed already.

Within a week, doctors had installed a port for his first chemotherapy treatment, which he received that day. He moved into Providence Sacred Heart Children's Hospital . . . just as the pandemic began, with all of its restrictions. The gym, for one, was closed, but Thomas finagled an exercise bike for the room. Meanwhile, he watched the kids around him—most

COURTESY OF THE THOMAS FAMILY

CASTAWAY

After getting an early cast sawed off, Thomas has three prosthetics now: one for football, one for lifting and one for everyday life.





SO HE COULD ENJOY HIS FEEL LIKE MY LEG,” *HE SAYS.*

far younger, even infants—endure radiation and sores and vomiting. Some died. “The worst feeling I can ever feel,” Thomas says. “Brutal.” Still, the empathy he summoned helped him worry less about himself.

Through 10 weeks of chemo, Devon and Melanie put recovery ahead of their marriage. Josh postponed his wedding. Brandon slept at Sacred Heart for more than 85 nights and visited at least 140 days. His hair started falling out, leaving patches in his high-top fade. He held off for as long as he could but ultimately conceded to the clippers. First, though, he turned to his mom: “I just don’t want you to cut yours.”

Melanie spent every one of those nights at her son’s bedside—it was her job, as she saw it, “keeping him alive.” “Every second of every day,” she says, “you feel like you can’t breathe. Waiting for something that will make you feel O.K. . . . [Like] a normal human being.”

Finally, on May 29, not three months after his diagnosis, Brandon went into surgery. His parents had pushed to postpone the procedure so he could enjoy his 16th birthday, but he told them no. “It already didn’t feel like my leg,” he says.

ON THAT FIRST Friday in September, Thomas strolls into the Bears’ home locker room, his favorite place in the world. He grabs his light-blue jersey, No. 28, and tugs it over his shoulder pads. He dances. He applies eye black. He shimmies his right cleat over his cracked prosthetic.

He checks himself in the mirror. Good to go.

Inside the trainer’s office, student managers wrap

tape around his wrists. Teammates are here, too, and they’re teenagers, so Thomas positions himself, as he likes to, in front of any jokes. Go ahead and tape “both ankles,” he cracks.

He’s the first player out of the locker room, the first to the stadium entrance, the first to walk onto the field. Mountains line the backdrop, but the view is cloudy from wildfires five hours away. The sun glows a bright orange as that old Phil Collins song plays over the P.A.: “I can feel it . . . comin’ in the air . . . tonight . . . oh lord.”

How in the world did Brandon Thomas end up here? It started the day of his amputation. Thomas believed, through hope or delusion, that cutting off part of his body represented his best chance to keep doing a lot of things, but none that mattered more than football.

He endured a catheter that hurt worse than surgery. He gained 30 pounds eating whatever he wanted during the first round of chemo, then lost it all. He didn’t blink when doctors told him they needed to up the dosage for Round 2 and tinker with his particular cocktail of drugs. He underwent three additional surgeries and chose to be awake for one of them. Then the side effects of the additional chemo kicked in. His first seizure hit on July 18, 2020, his second on Aug. 21, rattling him because he wasn’t in control. His body, again, didn’t feel like his own. Doctors dialed down the drugs, which only extended his treatment. He weaned himself from the steroids they offered him, which induced vomiting, so he went back on. No matter what, he couldn’t win. Not unless he made it back.

Or maybe he wouldn’t play football again, after all. “I don’t know if I can be as good as before,” he told his brother. Josh reminded him not to look too far ahead.

On Nov. 8, Thomas underwent his last overnight chemo treatment. On Dec. 22, doctors removed his port. He went home and friends—many with heads shaved

in solidarity—sat outside his bedroom window for long chats. (This was still in the early, extra-cautious days of the pandemic.) Teammates scribbled his name and number on their wristbands. They created a GoFundMe page and raised \$26,000 to help cover his medical and prosthetic costs. They held a parade in Thomas's honor, drive-by style, with a police escort, every car decked out with signs and streamers, as they chanted, "Bran-don! Bran-don! Bran-don!"

And while Thomas found himself heartened and grateful, he struggled still to find his normal, which made him uncomfortable, which led him to withdraw. He finished his last treatment on Feb. 8, 2021.

Then he met a girl. His best friend introduced the two, and Brandon played coy at first, because, he says, "I didn't think girls would like me, because of my amputation." But she did. They started dating.

His cancer was in remission. He stopped worrying about normal.

CUE THE MONTAGE. There's Brandon, with Josh, in that spring of 2021, working out in the backyard, doing ladder drills and sprints, adjusting to the prosthetic leg. Later, he's next to Josh and his fiancé when they finally marry, as the best man. *Standing.*

Eventually, Thomas called his coach about a comeback. Butner saw no reason they couldn't at least try, even if much recovery remained.

Among the obstacles: phantom leg pains, which came in waves. On Thomas's personal spectrum of pain, even the least awful tremors registered as *severe*. But he would try anything to get back, including mirror therapy, where a reflection of his existing limb was employed to trick his brain into believing he had moved his amputated leg, the idea being to prod the brain into believing that what's not yet true could be. After two weeks of therapy, he says, the pain subsided.

The aggressive approach of a young man who wanted to be Ray Lewis worked against him, too. In an X-ray that May, the nub below Thomas's amputated leg showed several hairline fractures. He needed rest, so he took up swimming, which is sort of resting, to build up his cardiovascular strength and move in a way that actually felt freeing.

Progress ultimately bolstered his comfort level, and he started removing his prosthetic in front of non-family members, showing off his new limb, new life, new him. Thomas began to make—and encourage—lighthearted jokes about his amputation. He also returned in the spring of 2021 to Central Valley's track team, competing in the ambulatory division. In only his second performance, he won state titles

in the shot put (42' 4 ½") and the 100-meter dash (13.91 seconds)—meet records in both events, competitive against national standards.

Yes, there were still moments that reminded everyone of how much work and reinforcement remained. At a volleyball tournament that Thomas participated in for fun, his prosthetic snapped in half—less scary than embarrassing, a reminder that he'd never be exactly like his classmates again. But doctors approved a return to football last fall, and there Butner found his linebacker's attitude was unchanged, and his hits still resonated.

Playing on a new prosthetic—his "athletic leg," as he calls it, with better flexibility and give, helping

CUSTOM FIT

Off the field and between tackles, Thomas gets encouragement—and adjustments on his "athletic leg"—from Devon and Josh.



him bend and change direction—Thomas moved to outside linebacker, to limit his lateral movement. (He uses a separate prosthetic for everyday activities and another for weightlifting.) Coaches tweaked his practice schedule, adding more rest. They planned to start him after a month or so, but he cracked the lineup for the opener, and on that night he played a football game both the same as always and like never before. All season he ranked among the Bears' top tacklers. He didn't miss a game; he hardly missed a down. He led more often and more loudly. He scored his first career touchdown, as a Wildcat quarterback making an offensive cameo. If this were *Rudy*, the

story would end there, the kid with one foot scoring as his career wound down in ceremony. But the score was never the point.

Butner watched closely last season, searching for vulnerability, any hint that this comeback was too much. He never saw one.

On Halloween, shortly before Thomas led his team to the playoffs, the Seahawks invited him to a home game, where they honored Brandon and made him an honorary captain. Bobby Wagner, one of the best linebackers of this era, gave him a signed jersey.

And in that moment, at that game, Thomas didn't think *cancer*. He thought *NFL*.

HALF AN HOUR before this year's season opener, Devon Thomas makes his way down to the field to drop off a new, uncracked foot for his son's athletic leg. Just in case.

As his father heads back up to the stands, Brandon teeters with indecision. Inside the locker room, he sits down and holds the replacement, weighing whether



to swap it in for the damaged one just 23 minutes before kickoff. He removes the cracked foot and jiggles the new one into place. He tests out his balance with a couple of steps and likes the feel. *Screw it*. He glances at the quote on the home screen of his phone—IMPOSSIBLE ODDS SET THE STAGE FOR AMAZING MIRACLES—and stalks out toward the field.

The sweet kid is gone now, a few miles removed—and a world away—from the bedroom decorated with Disney and Spider-Man posters. He's no longer a "big *Minions* guy." Not for a few hours, anyway.

Back at middle linebacker, his gait is a little uneven but no worse than normal after the prosthetic change.

His family watches from the bottom level of the stands. He yells. Butner tells him, "You've worked really hard for this! You're allowed to be excited!" and he sort of hears it.

The game unfolds slowly, unevenly, the action twice stopped for long stretches so that injured players can be hauled off toward ambulances. This rattles Melanie, who thinks the cost of football is too high. For a few minutes, she feels like she cannot breathe.

But nothing fazes Brandon. He logs his first sack of the season, collects 12 tackles—four for a loss—and plays a little fullback in a 33–0 trouncing. Not bad for Week 1, especially with the pregame hiccup. He's clearly the best player on the field.

That night, and the ones that follow, reinforce the same point: Whether or not Thomas earns a college scholarship, it doesn't matter. But any team considering him—he's been talking to one FBS school and more at the FCS level, plus he'll have options in track—might want to fashion a wider calculus to account for everything he brings. Thomas survived cancer with a smile on his face and a resolve embedded deep within his soul. He holds a 3.63 GPA and will graduate with a year of college coursework already completed. He's the best leader on his team, the best player—strong and thick, taller and heavier and still growing. He'll only get more used to his prosthetics. "I truly believe there's a place for him [in college football]," says Butner.

In the locker room following the opener, the coach thanks his players and tells them they "could be dangerous" come playoff time, as long as they keep improving. The room smells terrible, like sweat and ointment and teenager, but none of the players seem to mind.

That's the good stuff. That's why Thomas came back. In Week 2, another win, he will make 16 tackles, four for a loss, and force two fumbles. In Week 3, another win, he will return an interception for a touchdown and make five tackles, two for a loss . . . but he'll also fracture the thumb on his right hand. He will not play the following week. He'll beg to compete and lose the argument, just as his team will lose without him that Friday night.

Thomas should know what's obvious: He has already won. He's Devon's hero—an embodiment, his dad says, of the human spirit. He's Melanie's greatest source of strength. He's Central Valley's inspiration, his coach's hammer. He'll continue to get scanned every six months for any signs of recurrent cancer. His next appointment is scheduled for November.

After the game, Thomas climbs back into his car and pulls out of the disabled spot. From here, he wants to play college football. And, after everything, who would dare tell him no? □

ONE OF THE GREATEST COLLEGE RUNNING BACKS OF ALL TIME WAS

When Bo Chose Baseball

BY JEFF PEARLMAN

ILLUSTRATION BY
HARRISON FREEMAN

SOMETIMES PEOPLE ASK questions even though they know the answers. For example . . .

Who would win in a fight, King Kong or The Hulk? (The Hulk, obviously.)

What's the best Hostess snack? (Duh, Ding Dongs.)

Who's the coolest member of Menudo? (Xavier.)

And in the early months of 1986: Will Auburn's Bo Jackson play pro football or major league baseball?

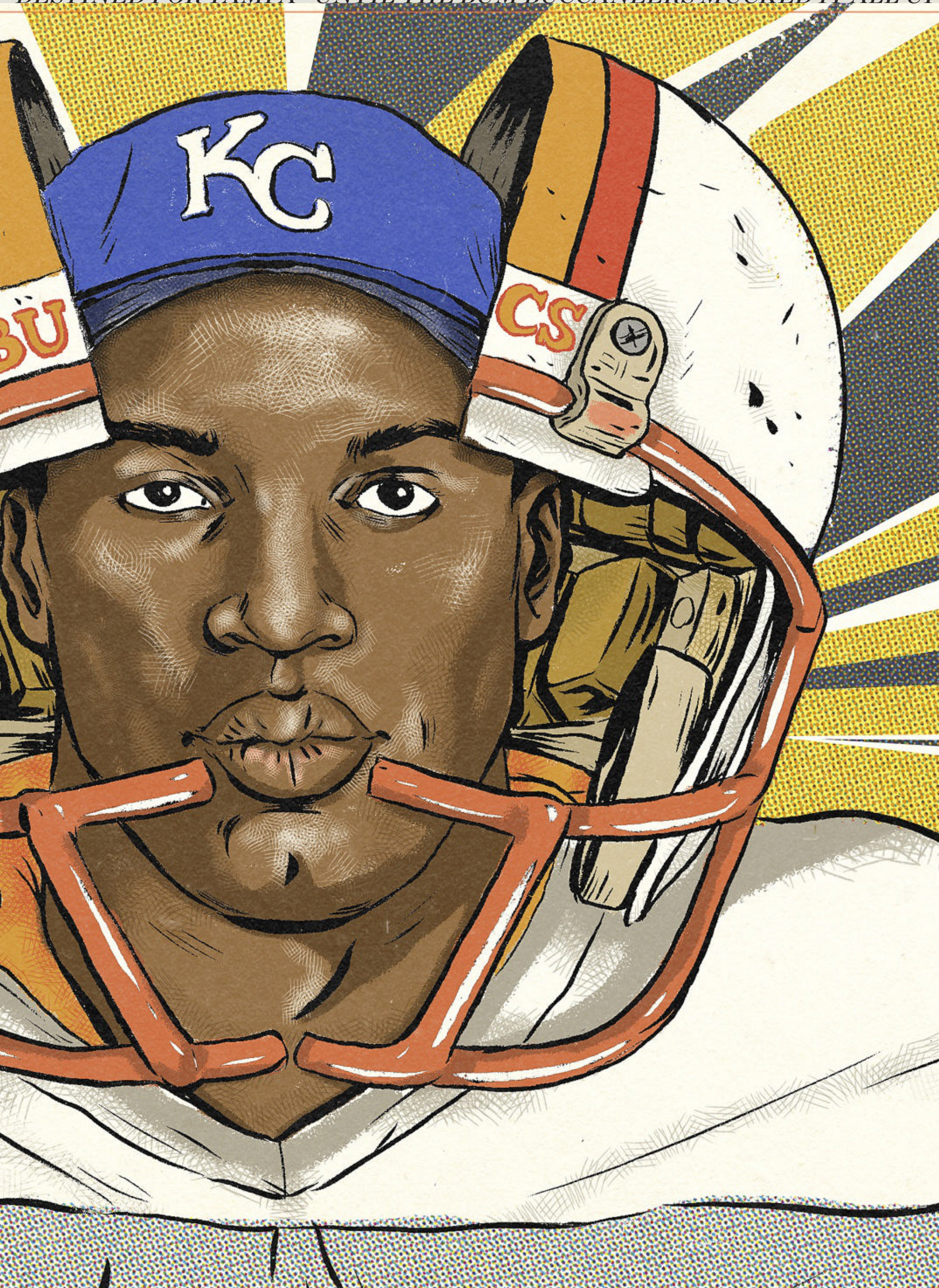
So obvious was the answer that to engage in debate was illogical. Sure, Bo Jackson was an excellent collegiate ballplayer with all sorts of talents. But clearly his future was in the NFL. It had to be. He was the reigning Heisman Trophy winner and the best running back prospect to emerge from the collegiate ranks since Orenthal James Simpson departed Southern Cal in 1969. Even though the stingy Tampa Bay Buccaneers held the first pick in the upcoming NFL draft, there was no way the franchise would let a phenomenon like Jackson slip through its fingers.

Plus, there were the financial logistics: Should Bo Jackson choose baseball, he'd be languishing in the minor leagues for—at bare minimum—a year and a half. His signing bonus would be in the \$100,000 range. The NFL, by contrast, was a land of riches. The average first-rounder was gifted with \$900,000 as soon as ink touched paper.

So as his time as a college football player faded and his life playing one final season on the Auburn diamond returned to focus, Jackson's dodging of the weekly *football or baseball?* inquiries ("I'm not telling



DESTINED FOR TAMPA—UNTIL THE BUM BUCCANEERS MUCKED IT ALL UP



until the summer,” he said) felt almost amusing.

He had to be picking football.

In March, *The Tampa Tribune* published a profile that delved into the baseball-versus-football debate, including this revelatory nugget: “Jackson has retained Frelan [sic] Abbott of Bessemer, Ala., as his ‘business manager.’”

Frelan Abbott had first met Bo when Jackson was a local on-the-rise high school phenomenon. Abbott paid Jackson to mow his lawn, and he occasionally slipped the teen some dollars. A few years later, Abbott—an unofficial Auburn football booster—made it a priority to help the Tigers land McAdory High’s star. Which, of course, they did. Once at Auburn, Jackson was presented with regular doses of money and material possessions via Abbott.

Now, intended or not, Jackson didn’t use the term “agent” to describe his relationship with Abbott. He said “business manager.” An active SEC player could not have an agent. But a business manager? It was murky.

In the midst of the college baseball season, Jackson had little to no time to devote toward the upcoming NFL draft, which was scheduled for April 29. So he had Abbott handle any dealings with the Buccaneers. This was, again, very murky territory. Had Jackson been done with college sports, he could have used Abbott with no complication. He even could have signed a contract with the man. But as Auburn’s center fielder, the only person allowed to chat with the Buccaneers on Bo Jackson’s behalf was Bo Jackson. Nobody else.

That’s not what happened.

Abbott and Phil Krueger, the Buccaneers’ assistant to the president, arranged it so that on the morning of Tuesday, March 25, the organization sent owner Hugh Culverhouse’s private plane to Auburn Municipal Airport, picked up Jackson and flew him to Florida for a medical exam, then returned him for that night’s home baseball game against Alabama-Birmingham. Jackson touched down just as the Tigers were taking pregame batting practice.

“It was unusual for Bo to miss BP,” says Hal Baird, Auburn’s coach at the time. “I don’t think he ever did.” So Baird asked aloud: “Does anyone know where Bo is?”

“Oh,” one of the Tigers said, “he’s not back yet.”

“Back from *where*?” asked Baird.

“He went to Tampa for a physical,” the player said.

“*What*?” Baird replied.

“Yeah,” the player said. “They sent a plane up.”

S---

“I knew,” Baird says, “that was bad news. Really bad news.”

The coach was well versed in the intricacies of college eligibility. The SEC was steadfast in demanding 100% amateurism of its participants. A flight paid for by the

LORE EAGLE!

The Ballad of Bo went like this: 4,500-plus total yards, 45 TDs and a Heisman for Auburn football; and 28 HRs with a .328 average in baseball.



DAMIEN STROHMEYER/BETTY IMAGES; JOE McNALLY (BASEBALL)

owner of a for-profit team would make Jackson a pro.

As soon as Jackson entered Plainsman Park to prepare for the night's game, Baird headed straight toward him.

"Bo," he said, "tell me what you've been doing."

Jackson informed his coach about the plane, then added, "It's fine. We had it checked out."

"Who had it checked out?" Baird asked.

"My business manager," Jackson replied. "Frelon." S---

"Bo," Baird asked, "did you pay for the flight?"

Jackson shook his head.

"I don't see how this was O.K.," Baird said.

Baird held Jackson out that night. When the game ended, Baird called Pat Dye, Auburn's football coach and athletic director. "Coach, we've got a problem here," he said. "Bo made a trip to Tampa on the Buccaneers' plane. I'm pretty sure he just ended his eligibility."

Dye drove to Baird's office. It was 11 p.m. Both men felt as if they'd been punched in the gut. Dye picked up the desk phone and dialed the home number of SEC commissioner Boyd McWhorter, a by-the-book man who believed rules needed to be followed.

Initially, the conversation pertained specifically to Jackson and the facts of the plane trip. *This is what happened. When it happened. Who was involved.* Then "Coach Dye went nuts," says Baird. "He undressed [McWhorter] like he was a yard dog. He was dog-cussin' him, calling him every name in the book. He was citing all the things Bo Jackson had done for the conference."

Toward the end of the call, Dye said to McWhorter, "Let him pay the money back and restore his eligibility."

"That," the SEC commissioner replied, "won't be possible. He broke the rules. He's ineligible to play any more sports for Auburn." *Click.*



FOUR DAYS LATER, columnist Dick Young slammed the NFL team in the *New York Post*, insisting the flight was a "put-up job" and that the team had to have been aware it would strip Jackson of his remaining eligibility. Wrote Young: "Now that there are to be no more at-bats for the edification of big league scouts, it is felt that his baseball interest will wane. Pro football will have an open field."

But this made little sense. The Buccaneers had the No. 1 selection. They wanted Bo Jackson, and 34 more college baseball games wouldn't have changed that. So why intentionally infuriate him? "My dad said stupid stuff a lot, but he wasn't a vicious man," Gay Culverhouse, Hugh's daughter, said years later. "I don't know the precise truth, but I'm pretty sure my dad wasn't smart enough to purposefully destroy Bo's ability to play baseball." (Hugh Culverhouse died in 1994; Gay died in 2020.)

Jackson was incensed, heartbroken and more than a bit humiliated. But while he held a grudge against the Buccaneers, his ire was mainly directed toward his sorta-kinda agent. For an April 5, 1985, *Atlanta Constitution* piece, writer Chris Mortensen tracked down Abbott and told him the rumor was he now served as Jackson's agent.

“That’s not true,” Abbott said. “But call me next week.”

There would be no next week. Jackson later explained to his biographer, Dick Schaap, how his relationship with Abbott ended: “I kicked his ass out.”

WITH HIS COLLEGIATE sporting career officially over, and with Frelon Abbott persona non grata, Bo Jackson had a couple of big events circled on his calendar.

First, on April 29, 1986: the NFL draft. Second, on June 2, 1986: the Major League Baseball draft. The problem: He needed guidance.

So when the ugly aftertaste of the Frelon Abbott experience faded, he went about finding someone to trust. That ultimately led him to the office of Susann McKee, an Auburn-based Century 21 real estate agent whose daughter, Georganna, attended school with Bo. McKee was 41 at the time and had no experience in sports management. Bo, however, knocked on her door one day, introduced himself and said, “I don’t trust anyone.”

“Oh,” replied McKee.

“But I know your daughter and I know about you,” Jackson said. “I’m about to be the number-one draft pick in the NFL, and I’d like you to manage me.”

McKee was out of her depth. She knew she was out of her depth. But Jackson wasn’t looking for a miracle worker. Just someone with his best interests in mind.

A few days later, McKee reached back out to Jackson. “O.K.,” she said. “I can help you as a manager. But you need a lawyer to handle contracts. Because there are things I don’t understand.” For that, she recruited a Mobile law firm that also had no experience in the world of athletics. Jack Miller, the firm’s founder, would take the lead; Tommy Ziemann, the former head of the antitrust section of the state attorney general’s office, would handle football; and Richard P. Woods, possessor of a tax degree, would take baseball.

On Saturday, April 26, a mere three days before the NFL draft, Ziemann and Miller sat with Culverhouse in Tampa. The Buccaneers’ owner wasted no time with pleasantries. “He was basically saying that unless Bo Jackson asked to play with them, they weren’t even going to make him an offer,” recalled Ziemann. “Which is a strange way to deal with a Heisman Trophy winner.”

Ziemann stressed to Culverhouse that baseball was a legitimate option—the first pick in the upcoming draft belonged to the Pirates, who told Woods they loved Jackson and thought him to be a remarkable prospect—but he was met with dismissive laughter. Was Jackson really going to turn down millions of NFL dollars to stand in a minor league outfield and kick at the weeds?

“Culverhouse is a businessman, and one, I think,

who only negotiates from a position of strength,” said Ziemann. “But he clearly didn’t have that with Jackson, because Bo Jackson isn’t driven by the dollar. He’s driven by what Bo Jackson wants to do.”

As the draft neared, teams reached out to Tampa to see whether the No. 1 pick was available. The Buccaneers’ asking price, however, remained firm: two marquee players and a first-round draft choice, or three marquee players yet to enter their primes.

“BO WAS CORRECT IN HIS INSTINCTS. HE WAS RIGHT IN HIS OWN DYSFUNCTION. NO SANE



BO DIDN'T KNOW

In weighing baseball vs. football, Jackson was moved in the end by the bad bargaining of Culverhouse, the Bucs' owner.

It was a joke. Just as major league teams were reluctant to draft Jackson in the first round—the risk of losing him to football was far too great—NFL teams were reluctant to offer Tampa a king’s ransom. What if, say, the 49ers gave up cornerback Ronnie Lott, halfback Roger Craig and nose tackle Michael Carter . . . and then Bo wound up a San Francisco *Giant*?

SHORTLY AFTER 8 P.M. on April 29, NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle leaned into a microphone. “With the No. 1 pick in the 1986 NFL draft, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers select . . . Vincent Edward ‘Bo’ Jackson, running back, Auburn University.”

Jackson, in a pinstriped gray suit, walked to the stage to shake Rozelle’s hand. The commissioner gripped a football and said to Jackson, “*This* is the ball you want, Bo.”

“I’ll admit,” Jackson replied. “I can hit that better than a baseball.”

There was no Buccaneers jersey for Jackson, though. And Culverhouse was nowhere to be found—the team was represented by Bob Thompson, a community college athletic director who was pals with the owner. Jackson turned down an immediate offer to fly to

Tampa and meet with media and fans, but he was gracious. "I'm happy that the Buccaneers drafted me," he said. "It's nice to be the number-one player picked."

Four weeks later, on May 28, Jackson (urged on by his representatives) agreed to give the Buccaneers something of a shot. He traveled to Tampa, held a quick press conference in Salon B at the Airport Hilton, then grabbed dinner with a handful of Bucs players. The next morning he had breakfast with former Tampa

And Culverhouse, says Joe Henderson, a columnist for *The Tampa Tribune* at the time, "was a horrible human being. . . . He cared about the bottom line, and nothing else."

Young, who spent two years with the L.A. Express before the upstart United States Football League folded, came to Tampa in 1985 and was thunderstruck by the incompetence. "I remember at one point I called my dad and said, 'I think I'm just gonna go to

NCTS," SAYS YOUNG. "THE BUCS COULD NOT STOP THEIR PERSON WOULD CHOOSE TO JOIN THAT FRANCHISE."



defensive lineman Lee Roy Selmon, went on a sight-seeing tour with receiver Theo Bell and learned he was going out for an intimate lunch with just the owner and the team's 24-year-old quarterback, Steve Young.

That was Culverhouse's idea. He thought the articulate Young was an ideal recruiter. "You gotta sell him, Steve," Culverhouse said before the meal. "Sell him on the future of this organization."

"O.K.," Young replied. "I'll do my best."

The Bucs had finished 2-14 in 1985, their third straight losing season. Their facilities were at a Division II college level. The roster was thin. The offensive line was a rotting slab of rank meatsicles. "There was nowhere worse to play," says Ivory Sully, a veteran defensive back on that team. "They didn't care about winning."

law school,' " Young recalls. " 'I don't wanna do this.' "

But with Jackson in town, Young had a task. The two athletes and the owner went to one of Tampa's fancier steak houses, and after a few minutes Culverhouse looked at Young and said, "Let me leave you two guys to talk." He excused himself and walked from the table. Within seconds, Jackson leaned in. "Hey, man," he said, "I'm never coming here. Just so you know, there's no f---ing way."

Young smiled. "Well," he replied, "I guess that ends my recruiting thing."

Culverhouse returned, and neither player let him in on the discussion.

"Bo was correct in his instincts," says Young, years later. "You can be a losing team with a plan. You can be a

losing team with direction. But the Buccaneers could not stop their own dysfunction. No sane person would choose to join that franchise."

THE BASEBALL THING still felt far-fetched.

When asked, Jackson told media members that he was "50/50" as it pertained to the two sports. But with the Buccaneers' all-around odiousness, the idea of shocking the system gained momentum. That was Bo Jackson in a nutshell: He gravitated toward the unexpected. Though never particularly rebellious, he believed in walking his own path, expectations be damned. So as the weeks passed and the inevitability of his NFL future seemed a near-certainty, a turn toward baseball felt increasingly alluring.

On May 19, Jackson and Woods traveled to Toronto

to meet with Pat Gillick, the Blue Jays' general manager, and later that month Woods visited Anaheim to break bread with Mike Port, the Angels' GM. Both franchises were genuinely interested in Jackson, but they remained concerned about wasting a valued pick on the Buccaneers' future halfback.

After returning from the West Coast, Woods was in his office when Baird, the Auburn baseball coach, called. A former Royals prospect, Baird retained close ties with the organization. In particular, he was in contact with Kenny Gonzales, the scout who had tracked Jackson dating back to high school.

Baird knew how high Kansas City was on Jackson, and he urged Woods to reach out to Art Stewart, the Royals' scouting director. Although Stewart never saw Jackson play, he gobbled up Gonzales's reports. The scout was of the belief that Bo Jackson—five-tool megapropect—was the (potential) second coming of Mickey Mantle. Hence, Woods and Stewart spoke, and the conversation concluded with Jackson's being invited to Kansas City for a predraft meeting.

On the afternoon of May 30, Jackson and Zieman arrived in Missouri and headed down to Royals Stadium for a matchup against the Rangers, where Jackson was introduced to Stewart and John Schuerholz, the general manager. Schuerholz had visited Auburn to watch Jackson play as a college junior, and he was overwhelmed by the power-speed combination. But this all felt ridiculous. "I think we're being used," Schuerholz said to Stewart shortly before Jackson's arrival. "I think we're being used for leverage they can use in football."

Shortly after Jackson stepped through the front doors, the skeptical GM sat him down for a one-on-one.

"Bo," he said, "do you really want to play baseball?"

"Yes, I do," Jackson replied. "That's why I'm here."

"You're not using us for leverage?" Schuerholz asked.

Jackson looked him in the eye. "Mr. Schuerholz,"

BATTLE ROYAL

Kansas City's foes in the war for Bo: the Bucs, who blew it; and every rational baseball team, each of which assumed he'd play football.



he said, "that is not something I would ever do."

Later, after attending batting practice, Jackson strolled into the home clubhouse, where players were at their lockers preparing for the game. He shook hands with pitcher Bret Saberhagen and DH Hal McRae. George Brett, the team's biggest star and a die-hard football fan, introduced himself to Jackson. When it was time for Jackson to leave, Brett yelled out, "Good luck in football, Bo!"

Jackson stopped, spun and headed straight toward Brett. He pointed a finger in the superstar's face and roared, "Don't you bet on it!"

HELD VIA CONFERENCE CALL, the 1986 MLB draft began with the Pirates selecting a University of Arkansas infielder named Jeff King. Inside the Royals' draft room, the uncertainty was agonizing. Gonzales, the scout whose life was now largely devoted to all things Bo, swore Jackson would never sign with the Buccaneers. "You have to understand," he pleaded with Stewart, "he hates them. Passionately. He wants to play baseball, especially if it's for us."

"Do you think anybody else knows what you know?" Stewart asked.

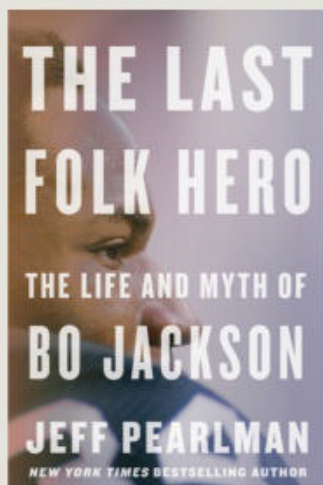
"Definitely not," said Gonzales.

The Royals used their first pick (No. 24) on Tony Clements, a high school shortstop who would never pan out. The opening round passed without Jackson being selected, then the second and third rounds. Kansas City was playing a dangerous game of greatest-athlete-anyone-had-ever-seen chicken. As were the Angels and Blue Jays, clubs equally interested and terrified. As the fourth round began, Stewart looked at Schuerholz and said, "If we blow the fourth-round draft pick with Bo Jackson, the franchise is not going to fold."

With the 103rd pick, in the fourth round, the Angels tabbed . . . Paul Sorrento, a Florida State outfielder.

Deep breaths.

With the 104th pick, in the fourth round, the Cardinals



*Excerpted from
The Last Folk Hero:
The Life and Myth
of Bo Jackson
by Jeff Pearlman.
Copyright © 2022
by Jeff Pearlman.
Reprinted by permission
of Mariner Books,
an imprint of
HarperCollins
Publishers.
All rights reserved.*



tabbed . . . Mark Guthrie, a pitcher out of LSU.

The Royals' draft room broke out in cheers.

As soon as the noise dimmed, Stewart leaned into the phone and crowed, "The Royals select Vincent Edward Jackson, outfielder, Auburn University. Better known as Bo."

MORE THAN A MONTH had passed since the NFL celebrated Jackson as its No. 1 pick, and the Buccaneers had yet to make an offer. On the day his team took Jackson, Culverhouse promised reporters, "We'll make him the highest-paid player ever taken."

On June 13, Zieman and Miller flew to Tampa to sit across from Culverhouse. They'd already told the Buccaneers they had no interest in swapping terms. They wanted the team to put its absolute best offer on the table. But these were the Buccaneers. Instead of presenting firm financial figures, they broached the topics of drug tests and skill guarantees. It was exasperating.

One day later, Tampa Bay presented its offer: \$4 million over five years, including a \$1.5 million signing bonus (\$1 million as an annuity that would kick in by 1998). An accompanying list of incentives could, at best case, bump the deal's value up to \$7.6 million. On the bright side, it was an enormous jump from the four-year, \$2.6 million deal the top selection in '85, Virginia Tech's Bruce Smith, landed with Buffalo. Zieman asked whether the Bucs could increase the numbers, to which Phil Krueger replied, "I could probably get it bumped up a few more dollars." Moments later, having conferred with the owner, Krueger said, glumly, "I went to talk to Mr. Culverhouse, and Mr. Culverhouse said, 'I won't raise it a penny.'"

To Jackson, none of this was surprising. From the day he lost his college baseball eligibility, he viewed Culverhouse warily. He didn't trust him, didn't like him, didn't want to play for him.

When Jackson ultimately rejected the offer, Culverhouse threatened to cut it in half. "And," the

Bucs' owner said, "you won't have a f---ing choice."

In a peculiar way, Jackson *loved* this. The franchise he wanted nothing to do with was making his decision simple. "I told my lawyer to tell Culverhouse to go f--- himself," Jackson later said. "And then when it was all said and done he pissed one of my lawyers off. My lawyer just got up and went to leave and then before he left he said [to Culverhouse], 'Now I see why you are such a tough person to work for. Because you're such an a--hole.'"

The Royals, on the other hand, were honest and upfront: \$850,000 for three years, with options to leave baseball if Jackson returned part of his salary.

The Buccaneers had offered four times more than the Royals. They were already sending out mailers featuring Jackson's photograph to potential season-ticket buyers. Woods stressed this to Jackson—not in an effort to lure him toward football, but to make clear that a kid who grew up wearing only socks to elementary school was turning down a lot of money from an organization that would centerpiece him. Jackson was unmoved. "I'm not interested in anything Hugh Culverhouse has to say, offer or anything," he said. "And that's that. . . . The old c---sucker."

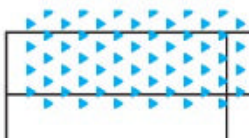
On June 20, Jackson and Woods flew to Memphis, home of Avron Fogelman, Royals co-owner and owner of the Memphis Chicks, Kansas City's Double A affiliate. Woods, Fogelman, Schuerholz and Ewing Kauffman (the Royals' majority owner) negotiated deep into the night as Jackson snoozed in a nearby chair.

The final offer boosted Jackson's earnings to \$1,066,000. It also included two guarantees: (1) that Jackson would start his career no lower than Double A; and (2) that he would be called up to the majors before the end of the 1986 season.

Around 11:50 p.m., Woods looked at Jackson and asked, "Are you ready to sign?" Jackson smiled and said, softly, "I sure am."

Told by Zieman the next day of the decision, Culverhouse didn't scream or laugh or cry. He simply pulled out a cassette tape and played the recently released Dionne Warwick, Elton John, Gladys Knight and Stevie Wonder song "That's What Friends Are For." He said it gave him the proper perspective. Or something weird like that. "Keep smiling, keep shining, that's what friends are for," he told a (surely bewildered) reporter. "I don't think we're bums in this case."

The Tampa Bay Buccaneers—bums in this case—were left with nothing to show. Bo Jackson chose baseball. □



The USMNT's World Cup pedigree doesn't match that of soccer's global powers, but this year's historically young squad *[page 30]* should know this: A callow American talent has dominated the event before. At the first tournament, in 1930, a 20-year-old from Fall River, Mass., named Bert Patenaude *[below, in white]* had a goal and an assist to spark the U.S. to a 3-0 win in its first match, against Belgium. Patenaude then dropped the first hat trick in World Cup history in a 3-0 win over Paraguay. It was a different era, to be sure. But the U.S.'s third-place finish in the 13-team field is still its best showing, and Patenaude's four goals stand as the USMNT record for a single World Cup. Nice inspiration for this year's team: Sometimes youth rules on soccer's grandest stage.

POINT AFTER

THE WORLD AT HIS FEET



POPPERFOTO/GETTY IMAGES



VAPORS GO
STRAIGHT
TO THE
SOURCE
OF YOUR COUGH





From:
North Pole, NY



To:
Snowflake, AZ

Getting you Holiday Ready with fast and reliable service



DELIVERING
FOR AMERICA

Get Holiday Ready at
usps.com/getready

